ROY ROGERS

and

THE ENCHANTED CANYON

Tommy

ROY ROGERS
and the
Enchanted Canyon

An original story featuring ROY ROGERS,
King of the Cowboys, the famous motion picture,
radio, and television star as the hero

By

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AUTHORIZED EDITION

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CHAPTER 1 • King of the Cowboys

The boy came out of the shed, dragging a heavy leather saddle, and walked toward the peeled-pole corral where the blocky man held the black-maned buckskin horse. The man's tanned face moved in a prideful smile as he watched the boy set the saddle on the rail and return to the shed, then emerge again with a blanket and bridle on his arm. This time he paused, and turned his head as though he listened for some kind of sound or other.

"Little early yet, Pete," the man called. "Roy's letter said it'd most likely be afternoon before he got here."

"I guess I hoped he might be early, Pa," the boy named Pete said. "I thought I heard a sound just then."

"Bullet and Trigger, too?" The blocky man was smiling broadly beneath the wide brim of the dark hat.

The boy turned a grin toward his father, then looked away again. His eyes moved beyond the timber and adobe house drowsing in a bath of sunlight pouring between the over-reaching sycamores and cottonwoods, and he let them follow the bubbling creek beyond the canyon mouth to the grassy meadows reaching toward them from the shining Verde far away. Nothing moved across the whole of that expanse, but still he wasn't sure.

Pete's father chuckled and raised his head toward the ragged cliffs which lifted red and vertical from the canyon floor.

"Sounds like the wind to me," he said, and his head turned slowly as he squinted at the high crags, and at the crest of pine and spruce so far against the bending sky they looked like nothing but a fuzz. "Fall's coming early this year. Be a snow up there 'fore long."

Pete looked at the palisades in the blue and glaring sky, and heard the wind, wild and soughing in the fractures and the pinnacles.

"It's the wind, all right," he said. He walked through the gate and began to rig the horse. The talk of fall and the wind blowing had reminded him that he was going to miss the roundup once again. They had talked the whole thing over, but now the wind had unsettled him again.

He put his mind away from it, and thought of something pleasant. He thought of Roy Rogers, King of the Cowboys, paying them a call again, coming with his horse and dog. He wondered if Trigger had learned any new tricks since Roy's last visit. He had a lot to talk to Roy about; he had a new colt to show him. He warmed all over with the thought of it.

"It's been pretty near a year since Roy was here, hasn't it, Pa?"

"Just about." Bruce Allan tipped his hat up with one hand and ran his other over sandy, slightly graying hair. A lot of little lines fanned out around his eyes as he squinted, thinking. "Late summer, it was, last time."

"I wish he'd stay longer when he comes," Pete said. "It's never more than just a day or two."

"Be about the same again, according to his letter," Bruce said. "In the old days it was more sometimes, but the Cattle Association keeps him pretty busy now."

Bruce was speaking in quick breaths of air as he braced against the buckskin's playfulness, and slipped the bit between the horse's teeth. Hurricane always made a big game of getting rigged.

"Be almost worth it having some rustling up the canyon in the basin if it'd make him stay awhile," Pete said. Pete held the Navajo blanket under Hurricane's nose so he could sniff it. The buckskin had no black streak running through his heart, but he was a kind of one-man animal to Bruce, and he was always full of beans and ginger. Because he bucked for love of the life that burned in him, Hurricane was a good horse for Pete to learn the wild ones' ways on. He had been taking his lumps from Hurricane once a week all summer long.

"Well, I like Roy a lot, but those terms are kind of steep, don't you think?" Bruce had the bit in place at last. He buckled the strap of the headstall, and rapped the buckskin on the nose to show him who still bossed the outfit. "We can't afford to lose any stock, even to keep Roy around awhile."

Bruce kept his tone of gentle humor, but Pete wasn't fooled any by it. It was hard to run a ranch in country as wild and rugged as this, and the thought sometimes aroused a sense of uselessness in him. How could he help his pa if all he did was go to school and swamp the house out, and ride the buckskin now and then? A puncher wasn't worth his keep unless he was a range hand, too.

"I guess I didn't mean that, exactly," Pete said. He heard the wind moving in the rocks, and he was full of the roundup once again.

"I sure wish I could go to the basin with you this year, Pa, to bring the cattle down."

"I wish you could, too, Pete. Maybe next year." The blanket was on the buckskin's back, and Bruce was heaving the saddle up.

"Sometimes I think I'll be eighty years old before I go on a roundup," Pete said.

"Well, we can't help it if your school starts in again the same time as roundup week," Bruce said.

"Couldn't you go up as soon as Juan gets back from the calf-count up there?" Pete said. "That way there'd be time."

"That'd be pushing it pretty close," Bruce said. "I don't look for Juan for another couple days, and he sure ought to have some rest before he starts back up again."

Pete listened to the leather creaking as his pa kneed the buckskin's belly and pulled the cinches up. His pa was right, but that didn't keep him from being disappointed. Then Bruce straightened up and rubbed his forehead with his sleeve.

"And, anyway, it's still pretty rough up there for a feller twelve years old. I don't think your ma would like to come back from her visit down in Phoenix and find you gone. A rider's a good deal on his own up in that basin country. If we had enough so all could keep an eye on one another it might be different. But there's only Juan and me."

"I know," Pete said, and he felt shame that he should push his pa that way. They were poor and didn't have the riders for it. "It was just a thought; I just wondered."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that," Bruce said. He was laughing now and Pete knew he understood what was going through his mind and was trying to make it easy for him.

Pete made light of it with his own laugh, and hitched at his belt and then his hat. The horse was rigged and ready, and the time had come to mount and ride. He was all business getting straightened out and set.

He was more conscious of the buckskin now. As though Hurricane knew what was coming next, himself, he rolled his eyes around to follow Pete, and the muscles rippled underneath his tawny coat as if he were shaking flies away. Bruce moved around to his head and twisted the ear on the left to give him something to think about while Pete swung up.

Pete went up in one motion, his boot in the stirrup, his hands locked around the pommel, and his right leg swinging over. It was smooth and easy and he knew that Hurricane had hardly felt the weight and movement. He wasn't an easy horse to fool, but Pete knew the buckskin was never exactly certain just when he was on him. There was always a second or two after Bruce let go his ear before he moved, as though he was getting it set in his mind that Pete was there and was figuring what to do about it.

It was like that now as Bruce released the ear and moved away. Pete felt the life drumming through the buckskin's body, and then he felt it gather and contract, and then expand as though it were a coiled spring that was compressed to the point where there wasn't any holding it. He felt the head go down, and the mass of power shift under him and rise.

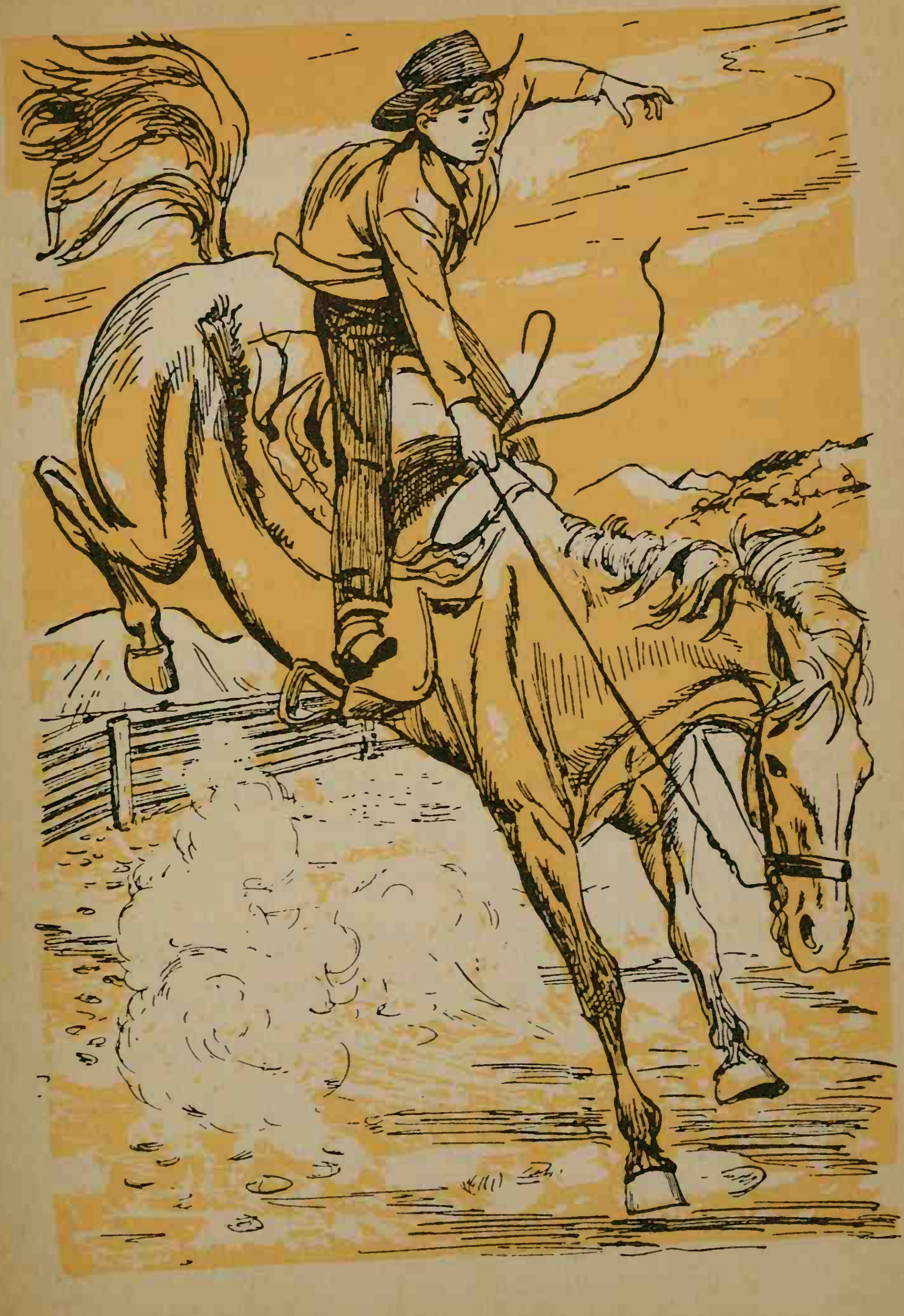
Hurricane's legs became spring steel pillars, and left the ground. Pete had the feeling of his breath being drawn from him, so fast did the buckskin arch beneath and lift. For a second it seemed the horse had got out from under him altogether and he was only sitting on the points of the shoulders beneath the saddle. He felt the muscles bulging and expanding, and drawing into themselves again as the horse descended and gathered itself to rise.

Pete felt the hoofs strike on the rigid legs, and the jolt hit him as if he had fallen off the roof. His head came down with a snap and everything inside him seemed to loosen up and move around. He felt himself being rammed against the pommel, and saw the stirrups and his boots fly out high and wide to either side.

After that it all got mixed up and confused. Sometimes he felt he was being driven through the horse like a bullet, and then again he would feel a mile of air between himself and the saddle. The sky turned in bright and dizzy arcs around him. Now and then it mixed with the red cliffs flashing by. Another time there would be a sea of dust and earth in a swimming haze. Once he saw a cottonwood tree green and clear, and thought to wonder when the leaves would start to turn.

It all came apart the way it had begun, in violence. All at once the buckskin drew the strength from every blade of grass he had ever eaten and went into a flying daze of crowhopping and sunfishing that made it feel like he was going fifteen different ways at once. It seemed as if he were trying to make a pretzel of himself.

Pete saw the colors of the sky and the cliffs and the trees



and the dust lose themselves in one another, and then a moment came when the ground came near and sudden, and he hit, and rolled and hit again, and stopped rolling with a roaring in his head and bright explosions going on and off before his eyes.

He knew he was on the ground, but he didn't know much else right away. He heard the roaring, still, but there were voices every now and then, and once he heard a dog bark in the middle of it, far away and hollow. The lights went off and on, not exploding any more, but glowing softly like heat lightning before a summer storm.

Something wet and warm moved over his face, and he put his hand out and felt the pointed ears and the furry muzzle. He tried again with his eyes and this time he saw the large dog standing over him.

"Bullet!"

Then hands took him under the shoulders and lifted him and steadied him. His arms were being moved and his legs felt over. When he looked he saw his pa holding onto one of his shoulders, and Roy Rogers the other.

"Roy!" He was standing steady now, looking around as the land came to rest. He saw Roy clearly, and his pa beside him. He was astonished to find Roy here all at once.

"That's the best peeling I've seen this year," Roy said. "You really wrung him out, Pete."

Pete slapped at the dust in his Levis and banged his hat against his leg. He felt awkward all of a sudden.

"It wasn't much," he said. "I haven't rode him to a walk yet. He always gets the best of me."

"You rode him eight seconds," Bruce said. "And then the cinch broke. That horse was a ring-tailed twister, certain."

"You rode him till there wasn't anything left to ride," Roy said. Roy's face was tanned and smiling beneath the smooth, gray hat. "That'd do for me."

Pete looked around again. He saw the saddle lying in a heap, and the blanket a couple of yards away from it. Hurricane was standing off to one side, watching, as if he wondered when the game was going to start again.

"Maybe there's some hope for me at that," Pete said as he stared at the saddle on the ground. "I sure didn't feel it go. It just seemed like the horse exploded under me."

"It kind of looked that way, too," Roy said. "I guess your pa's been putting gunpowder in his hay."

They were going toward the gate. Bruce caught hold of Hurricane's bridle and removed it. Pete picked up the blanket and the saddle and lugged them to the shed.

"It was some surprise to wake up and see you," Pete said to Roy when he came out again. "I thought I heard you earlier, but Pa said it was a little soon."

"Maybe you did hear him," Bruce said. "I'd hardly turned you loose when they came around the house."

The word "they" made Pete think again and he turned and saw Trigger standing in a lake of sycamore shade, his blond mane and tail clear against his golden coat. Bullet was having himself a sniff at Hurricane, as though to get it straight whether this was the same animal that had turned itself inside out a couple of minutes ago. Hurricane, who hadn't had any dogs to play around with since Pa had sold his hound pack, was having a sniff or two himself.

When they came to the gallery Pete got cups and a pitcher of ice-cold water from the spring house, then moved a chair up to the rail and put his boots up like the others. He took a long cool drink and listened to the talk the two men made. It didn't seem his legs were long enough for him to cross one boot upon the other the way that Roy was doing.

"Didn't see Mary around anywhere, Bruce; gone to town, has she?"

"She's down in Phoenix for the week, to see her sister."

"Too bad I missed seeing her," Roy said, and he looked around. "About set for roundup, I suppose," he went on, along a new train of thought. "It ought to go easy enough with this champion peeler, here, riding for you."

"Well, it's just my tough luck I can't use him," Bruce said, and he winked at Pete. "Me and Juan Gallego are stuck with it all alone."

"It's school starting in again," Pete said. "You'd think they'd hold off till everybody got their cattle set for winter." He hoped Roy would appreciate the contrary way of it.

"By golly, you'd think they would, at that," Roy said, and Pete knew Roy had seen it as unfair, too.

After the talk of school, there was a word or two about the weather. There had been a skiff of snow in Flagstaff a day or two ago, Roy had heard; he wondered if winter wasn't coming down ahead of time. After a while he sat back and simply smiled out on the vista of the canyon lifting red and splendid, with the blue and bubbling creek winding through the floor of it.

"I don't know of anything I look forward to as much as coming here," he said. "If you ever want to sell out, Bruce, let me know."

"Pete's grandpa fought pretty hard for this place," Bruce said in a minute. "He and the Apaches went at it quite awhile before they left him be. We'd have to be in sorry shape to let it go."

"He fought Ben Tate, too, don't forget," Pete said.

"That's right. And it was sure a sad day for Ben when Grandpa finally passed on. Lost the only real friend he'd ever had."

A smile came over Roy's face as he tipped his chair back. "By golly, how is Ben, anyway?"

"Still up there at his claim," Bruce said, "and odd as ever, too. We pass his diggings every time we go to the basin. Juan's up that way now, and'll have word."

"I don't guess he ever made his strike," Roy said. "Seems to me he was always just about to be a millionaire. Making plans to sail around the world, and eat lobster, and have all his clothing tailor-made."

"He's been making those plans for more than fifty years," Bruce said. "He just strikes one pyrite vein after another. But he won't give up."

Roy had a laugh out of that. It was kind of funny that Roy should know more about the upper country than Pete, himself, but Roy had been up there a lot with Pa in years gone by. Pete had only been that far a time or two; he knew Ben, and he had seen the basin, but that was all.

But Roy had been in every part of it. He had seen the Indian ruins mouldering in the cliffs, and the creek plunging off the headwall of the Mogollon Rim in a cloud of airy mist, looking like a man's breath on a frosty day. He had heard the eagles screaming far and fierce.

Bruce asked how long Roy thought he could stay.

"A couple of days, is all," Roy said. "The Association has me on the move. I'm on my way to Payson now."

"Payson?" Bruce said.

"I'd sure rather stay right here, but they've had a siege of brand-blotting, and I've got to see about it."

"Some fellers sure get careless with a running iron."

This was big-time cow-thieving talk, and Pete hoped Roy would keep right on. Most times, Roy was a little vague about the exact nature of his work. Likely, he had to be careful, sometimes, what he said and where. No doubt a rustler would give a lot to have Roy in his rifle sights.

But the brand business seemed to have put Roy's mind on something else, and he kind of screwed his eyes up and scratched his cheek as though that helped him remember the way of it.

"Speaking of the peculiar ways of men, your town of Cottonwood was getting its exercise when I rode through this morning."

"Cottonwood?" Bruce said. "They always sleep till noon there."

"There's one that wasn't. I heard him airing out his gun on a side street somewhere."

"Some puncher, likely, greeting the new day."

"Might have been. But I learned long ago not to stick my nose into another man's gunfire."

"Better be careful, Roy, you'll live to be a hundred." Bruce was smiling broadly as he said it.

They carried on the pleasant small talk until noon. After lunch Pete fixed a pan of food for Bullet, and went around to the sycamore shade and took the rigging off of Trigger. He rubbed the big gold horse with a clean cloth, then turned him into the creek pasture with some of the other stock. It was a funny thing to see his new colt, Rusty, come sailing over the field to look the stranger over. Being a quarter horse, Rusty was nearly all hind legs, and he hadn't learned the way they worked yet. Trigger must have thought it mighty strange to see the youngster running at him sidewise.

As he returned to the gallery his eye caught a distant movement coming down the canyon from the north. It was a horse and rider approaching slowly along the creek. When he recognized the posture of the rider, and the color of the horse, he knew Juan was coming in.

"Hey, he isn't due for two days." It was Bruce said it as he and Roy came out on the gallery again.

"Maybe he wearied wandering around up there," Roy said, and Pete knew he was going to make a joke. It always amused Roy that Juan could sleep all day in the saddle if he wanted to. "Why, I believe he's having his siesta right now."

Bruce didn't speak right away. Juan was closer when he did. "No, he isn't. Something's wrong."

Something in Juan's position spoke out to them and said he wasn't sleeping. The slowly moving animal had come as far as the pasture fence, and Pete could see that Juan wasn't being lazy; he was hurt.

Without any thought about it, he was running. The new idea had got to them all at once, and they were running toward the horse and Juan. Pete saw the reata looped and tied to hold him in the saddle. He saw Juan's swarthy face turned gray with pain beneath his long mustachios.

As Juan began to tilt and fall, Roy put on a spurt and went by Pete and Bruce to catch the rider. Then Pete was close enough to see the scuffing and abrasions on Juan's clothes. He saw the right leg bent and twisted, in a way that no leg ought to be.

CHAPTER 2 • Bewitched!

Roy and Bruce supported Juan beneath the shoulders, one of his arms around the neck of each, and their own free arms about his back. It was fifty yards to the house, and nobody wasted breath on talk, except for Juan, whose eyes were closed against the pain and who said, *"Caray,"* softly, every now and then.

When Pete removed the rigging from the horse which Juan called Coronado, he looked it over carefully for a sign that might tell what had happened, but there was only some dust and a shallow scratch or two on the right flank, and nothing definite.

After he turned it into the pasture he returned to the house where Juan was lying on the bed in his room. Roy and Bruce had already removed the heavy leather chaps, and had about got the Levis cut away. Juan was bucked up on a pair of pillows and seemed more comfortable now that he was lying down. Pete poured a cup of water from the pitcher, and then another, and after that was gone Juan began to smile.

"Gracias, little Pedro, that puts life into a man. That alone was worth the ride."

"There's plenty more," Pete said, and he began to pour another, but Juan raised his hand.

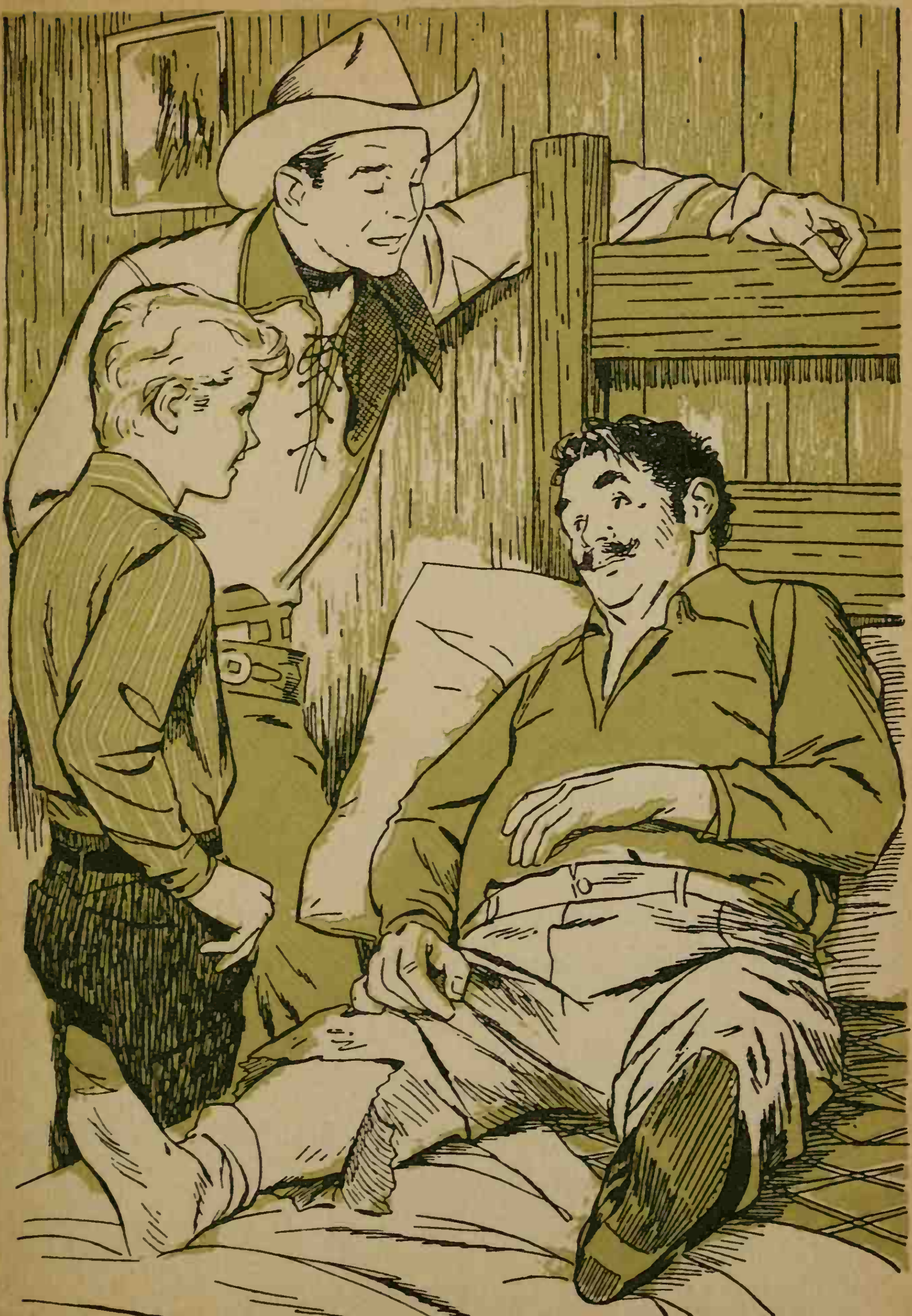
"Please, do not drown me; she is fine just as she is. But leave it where I can look at it."

"What happened, Juan?" Bruce said. They had got the leg exposed and Pete could see the twisting and discoloration near the ankle. "Did Coronado spill you during a siesta?"

Juan could make a small laugh now. His face was still pallid, but his curving mustachios had life in them. "Well, *si,* yes, I did fall, but pride compelled me to stay in the saddle. So Coronado was obliged to fall, as well; and he did, on top of me."

Juan looked up at the ceiling of the room, and Pete knew he was trying to see the accident again.

"Something frighten Coronado, I think," Juan went on. "All at once he is frightened and before I know it we



are on the ground. It is very hard and rocky at that place, and my leg is under him."

"Could have been a rattler," Roy said, half to himself, as though he was riding along with Juan, and seeing it occur. "It's likely cool up there now, but one might come out to sun itself."

"Maybe. *Quien sabe?* Who can say?" Juan shrugged his shoulders into the pillows. "I did not hear the little gentleman," he added, and Pete remembered that Juan's people always called the rattlesnake a gentleman because he gave a warning before he struck.

Bruce straightened up from looking at the leg, and took his hat off the carved pine chest. "Got to have a doctor here," he said. "I better ride for Caldwell."

"Wait," Roy said. "Let me go, Bruce. I can find him all right." Roy turned a wink and a grin on Juan before he finished it. "I've got to pay my room and board at this place, somehow."

"No, I'll go," Bruce said, and already he had settled his hat on his head. "You've come to rest a day or two, not go riding over the countryside."

"I'll saddle up for you, Pa," Pete said. "What horse will you ride."

"Buck, I guess," Bruce said. "Hurricane's had his workout for the day."

"I sure wish you'd let me do this, Bruce," Roy put in. "I'm bound to help out, somehow."

"Be a help if you can get Juan's story on this business," Bruce said.

Pete went out while they were still talking. When he came to the pasture gate all the horses drifted over to see what he was doing there. They all had the look of wanting to get in on it, and seemed a little disappointed that only Buck was going to get a ride out of it. By the time Pete had him rigged and ready Bruce came out and mounted up.

"Roy's going to put cold cloths on that leg, Pete," his pa said, looking down from the solid, bay horse. "Be a help if you can keep cold water coming from the spring house."

"All right, Pa," Pete said. Pete fingered the heavy *tapadera* covering up the stirrup on the left. "That's a queer thing to happen, isn't it?"

"I don't get it," Bruce said as he frowned on the thought. "Juan was just about born on a horse. Save Roy, he's the best rider I ever saw. It's a strange thing."

"Well, maybe he can figure it out, now he's home," Pete said. "Once we get him more comfortable."

"That might do it," Bruce said. "I'd like to listen in, but I'd better ride."

Buck's mane and tail bounced and jiggled with the starting motion, the trim hoofs brought the dust jumping from the earth, and the horse was gone. Pete filled a wooden bucket in the spring house and stopped for toweling in the kitchen on his way back to Juan and Roy. When he wrapped the icy toweling over the swollen leg, Juan made a tight smile and showed his teeth.

"Pedro, you are freezing me. Do you want to turn me into a block of ice? I feel like winter is coming to my bones."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Juan," Roy said with a grin. "After you're frozen stiff, you'll never feel it."

"Oh, so?" Juan said. "Well, that is better. I was worried for a minute." And they both laughed.

Roy kept the toweling cold by dipping it in the water bucket, and wringing it out before putting it on the leg. While this was going on, Pete went into the kitchen and fixed a bowl of soup, which he brought to Juan. When he had eaten, and had had still more of the ice-cold water, Juan looked up at the ceiling and Pete could tell he was ready to try to think about the accident again.

"How far up the trail did all this happen?" Roy asked, as though to help him get started with it.

"Well, it happens soon after I arrive in the basin," Juan began. "I think I will go across to the other side to camp before I begin the calf-count. Then I think I will circle instead of going directly, because the stream has a curve in it, and some of the calves may be grazing near the water with their *mamacitas.*"

When Juan paused for a drink of water, neither Pete nor Roy broke in, and he went on again as soon as he had finished.

"So I take to the left to have the creek in good view and in a while I come to a place where I am very near the basin walls and where the rocks are wild. It is just then that Coronado becomes *embrujada,* and we fall together on the ground."

It was a serious thing, but Juan's way with it gave to it a touch of humor. It made Pete think of all the other things in Juan's life that became *embrujada*—bewitched—from time to time. It was that way now as Juan thought about the strange behavior of Coronado and shook his head with the memory of the event.

Roy was watching Juan with a sly light in his eye.

"I always thought the basin and canyon country was *encantado,"* he said. "Now you say it is bewitched."

"Enchanted?"

"The mystery and beauty of it, Juan."

"Well, that may be so, for you," Juan said. "But it is *embrujada* for me. They are the same, but there is a difference, too."

Roy gnawed on his knuckle and Pete knew the joke was finished and he was thinking of the horse again.

"Could have been a snake," he said. "Even though you didn't hear or see one."

"No, I am certain there are no snakes. We are many yards from where the rocks are tumbled, and there is no snake anywhere in the open. Coronado, he is *embrujada,* I am certain. There are witches in that place. It is a very good place for witches to make their spells."

This time Pete and Roy both laughed, but Juan allowed his great mustachios to dip, and he shook his head. "No, I think even the calves are *embrujada."*

"The calves?" Roy said. "What have they got to do with it?"

"Well, I do not know for certain. As I said, I am only beginning the count when the trouble happens, but I do not see as many calves as there ought to be. I see some, but also I see many cows who are bawling for their young."

"Calves missing!" Pete said.

"So it looks to me," Juan said, and then he smiled. "Maybe I do not know whether that basin country is *embrujada* or *encantado,* but I know when a horse falls on me, and when a cow bawls for its calf."

Roy went to the window and looked at the cliffs rising to the Rim. "There's been snow at Flagstaff," he said when he turned away. "And likely cold in general in the high country. That means the predators are coming down winter."

"And because the cold is earlier, they're in the basin ahead of the time when the stock is usually out," Pete said.

"That would account for missing calves," Roy said. "The coyotes may be getting at them—or a lion now and then."

"But that would not account for Coronado," Juan said.

"No, the coyotes and lions wouldn't bother him," Roy said. "I guess that's for the *brujas* to explain."

"Now we are talking sense," Juan said, and he laughed silently into his mustachios.

But there was nothing funny about the calves. They had assumed an importance beyond the mystery of the horse.

Maybe, Pete thought, the whole thing was being exaggerated, but it was something to wonder over.

"Maybe your pa ought to move this roundup forward a few days, Pete," Roy said after a while. "With Juan out of it, there's no reason to wait till next week. I can take his place, and we can get up there right away and get to the bottom of this."

Pete wondered if Roy meant to include him in the "we." It was too early yet to tell anything about it. He longed to go, and school would not interfere this time, but Pa would have to say. And someone would have to stay and care for Juan.

As though he understood Pete's thoughts, Juan put his hand out and squeezed Pete's arm gently.

"This time you go, little Pedro. I know you want to very much. And I will be all right."

"You can't be left alone, Juan," Pete said. "You have to eat. You have to drink."

"Simply fill the pitcher and give me some jerky, and I will be very fine. I can take siestas all day long."

Juan made it sound very easy, but Pete knew it was more than that, more than a pitcher of water and some strips of jerky. Aside from leaving Juan alone, there was the thing about his being twelve years old.

He spoke that part of it out loud, and looked from Juan to Roy. Roy was smiling.

"If Juan could make out all right, your pa might think Bullet man enough to keep an eye on you. He's a whole lot better than plenty of men I've known."

"I know," Pete said. "I'd sure like to go, but I couldn't leave here if I was needed." Pete looked at Juan and wondered.

"We will let the doctor say, when he comes," and there was Juan's smile again. "I am as tough as old bullhide, Pedro. When he fix me up, I be fine again. I bet you both I walk by sundown."

"You'll have to be tougher than bullhide for that," Roy said, "but maybe you can get along alone."

Bruce and Dr. Caldwell arrived beyond midafternoon. The doctor was a blunt little man, all business, and hardly had time for more than a nod and a quick smile before he went inside. He wore a black suit and a black string tie and a black hat, and he began to scatter these articles right and left as he came into the house and followed Bruce to Juan's room. Pete had them all piled onto the table in the living room when Roy came out.

"I guess we best sit," Roy said. "You know what they say about too many cooks spoiling the soup."

"I don't guess we can help much anyway, can we?" Pete said.

"We've done about all we can. Your pa can give a hand if it's needed. Juan said something about a hunk of pearwood he wanted brought to him. He said you'd know where it was."

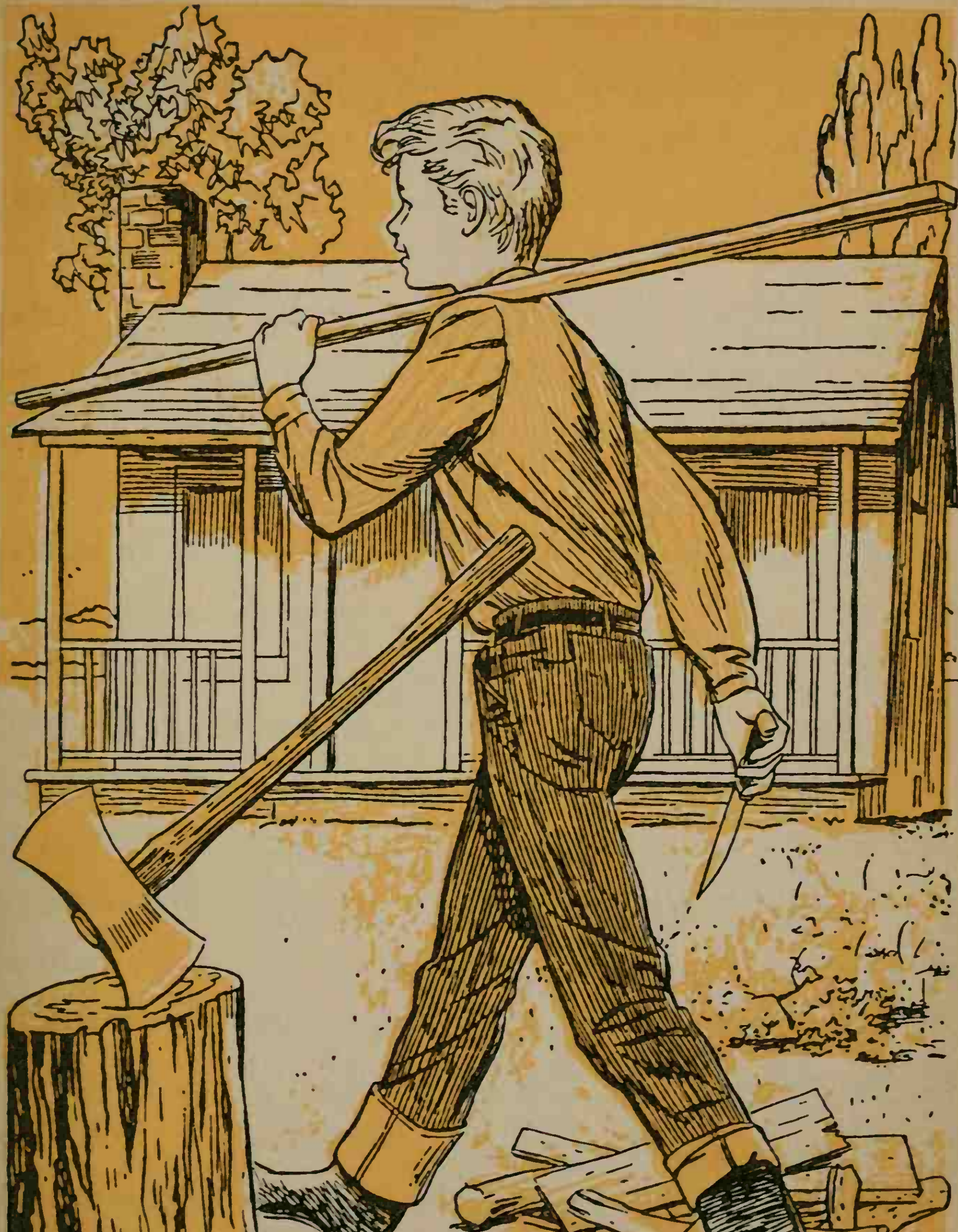
"We've got some by the shed," Pete said, and he looked at Roy with mild surprise. "Juan wants it now?"

"That's what he said. A piece about six feet long, and maybe an inch and a half or two inches in diameter. And he said to bring his belt knife, too. I guess he wants to whittle away some time."

"One time he carved a rattlesnake out of a pearwood piece," Pete said, and he remembered it again. "And it moved. It was jointed and you could coil it on your arm or pull it on the floor. Just like life."

"Well, he's got time to make a dozen now," Roy said.

Pete went out to the shed and found the belt knife, and then he picked out a nice straight piece of the wood in the pile outside. When he returned to the house his pa was in the living room with Roy.



"Well, he's all right," Bruce said as Pete joined them. "A clean break, just above the ankle. Caldwell has it set."

"That's good," Pete said. "Can I take him this wood now?"

"Better wait a minute. Caldwell's not done with the splinting and bandaging yet."

"How'd it go?" Roy asked and Pete knew he was thinking of the bright pain glistening when a bone was set.

"He never batted an eye," Bruce said. "He's as tough as bullhide."

"That's what he told us," Pete said. "I thought he was fooling."

There was a moment when nobody said anything, and then Bruce seemed to remember something. He looked at Roy. "I learned about that gunfire you heard this morning. That was the bank being held up."

"The bank?" Roy said. "In Cottonwood?"

"That's what Caldwell said. Tom Roberts, the teller, was hit. Bandit made off with a sack of notes."

"Is that right?" Roy said, and Pete didn't say a thing, but simply listened, astonished. "Is he all right? The teller?"

"Hit bad, I guess. No telling for a while which way he'll go. Caldwell's going back to him directly."

"How about the bandit, Pa?" Pete said.

"Got clean away. Took all the counter cash, but the shooting apparently scared him away from the vault stuff."

"And the teller was the only one around?" Roy said.

"That's right; it was early. I guess old Tom didn't have much of a chance. There's a posse taking up the trail."

Then the doctor came out of the room and the bank talk was forgotten for the moment. He washed his hands in the kitchen and then came back and put on his tie and his coat and his hat.

"That's going to bother him awhile," the doctor said as he tied the string tie in a bow. "Be better in a day or two. Keep him quiet, if you can. Let him eat whatever he wants. He'll likely do it anyway."

"Juan said he'd walk by sundown," Pete said, and he waited.

"He did?" Doctor Caldwell put his head back and gave a snort of laughter. "Well, it's all right by me, if he thinks he can."

"No, I mean it," Pete said. "He told us he'd do it. He isn't joking."

"Well, neither am I, sonny," the doctor said, and he laughed again, even harder.

“Much obliged for your coming out,” Bruce said. “What’s the cost come to?”

The doctor waved his hand in the air, and took his bag from the table. “Don’t have time to figure it now. Next time you’re in town, stop by the office.”

“All right,” Bruce said. “Any way you want it. I sure hope Tom Roberts comes along all right.”

The doctor was at the door and Pete was holding it for him. “Know by tonight. He’s got a bad wound. They better get that feller.”

“They will,” Bruce said. “Chris Johnson will drag him down.”

The door closed and Pete brought the doctor’s horse around from the hitchrack, and held the black bag while the doctor mounted up. When the doctor raised his spine of dust moving out, Pete went into the house again and took the piece of pearwood into Juan’s room, where Roy and his pa already were.

“Ah,” Juan said when he saw it. “That is a nice one. I will do very well with that.”

“It’s the best I could find, Juan,” Pete said. “I figured you could make a real nice snake out of that.”

“You did? Well, yes, it is just the right size.” Juan took a cut or two at the remainder of the clinging bark. "I tell your pa about the calves and falling from the horse. I think you will all go to the basin in the morning."

Bruce rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. "I don't know about that, Juan. We ought to go, sure enough, but don't go getting Pete all excited."

"I'm not excited, Pa," Pete said. "I'll be glad to stay with Juan."

"And I can't go getting Roy roped into this. He came to take it easy."

"You're a couple of hours late, Bruce," Roy said. "It was all settled while you were gone."

"So Juan tells me. But I can't ask you to go up there, Roy, and I can't leave Juan alone."

"I've already asked myself," Roy said. "And you heard what Caldwell said about Juan."

"What was that?" Juan asked.

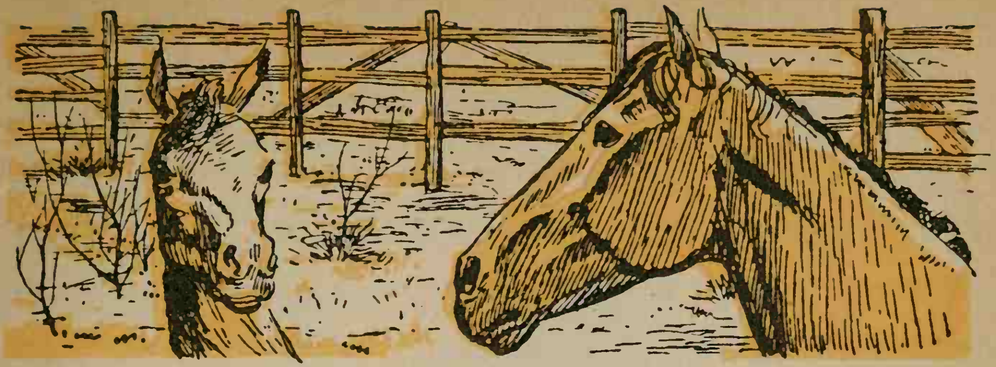
"He said it was fine by him if you walked by sundown," Bruce said. "But he laughed."

"Oh, he thought it comical?" Juan said.

"He thought it impossible," Bruce said.

"You wait," Juan said, and he flourished the long belt knife in the air. "You will be surprised."

And they were. Juan did not walk by sundown, as he had said, and as no one had believed. But in the morning Pete could hardly believe his eyes to see Juan come hobbling from his room, the weight of his bad leg taken on the pearwood crutch.



CHAPTER 3 • Pete Asks for Trouble

Juan had won his point, and Pete was allowed to go. Once Bruce had given his consent, with his hand before his mouth to conceal his amusement, Juan hobbled back to bed again. But he had shown them he could get around by himself if he was called upon to do so, and it was reckoned to be an insult to have Pete remain behind to wait on him.

They would leave at noon, now that everything was settled, and would travel as lightly as they could. They would take but one packhorse, a steady old gray named Alex, who would carry the bedrolls and the food. The whole thing would take the better part of five days if everything went all right, and the cattle could be easily located.

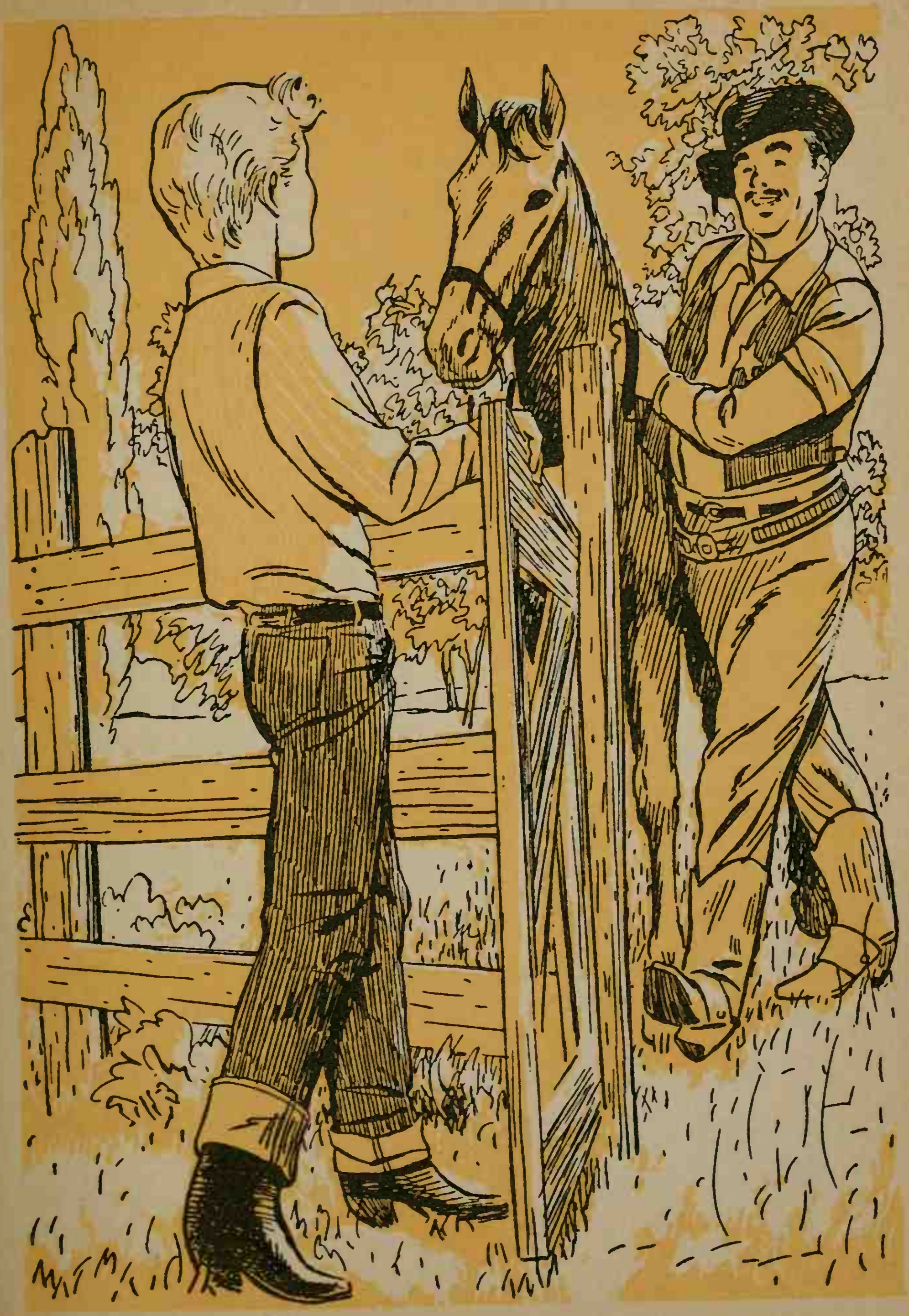
They were too busy to think much about the holdup at the bank, but when the man came toward mid-morning they remembered it again.

Pete caught sight of him first as the rider brought his horse in a haze of dust to the ford, and then walked it across the stream. The dust died at the creek's edge because there was more growth upon the other side, and Pete got a good look at the rider once he cleared the water. By the time the pretty bay horse reached the dooryard gate, Pete knew that Sam Mason, the deputy sheriff, had come to call.

At pretty near the same time, Bruce and Roy came around from the back of the house where they had been rolling up the bedrolls. They stood and waited while Pete opened the gate for Sam and then walked over to Bruce and Roy. Pete had a queer feeling of something developing out of this because Sam Mason had no business on a social call with a bandit on the loose.

Sam was a big man, with a smiling, beefy face, and a kind of bluff manner that made everybody like him. Pa sometimes said a man would surely have to be full of meanness to be sore about being arrested and brought in by Sam. He was right now all full of pleasantness, and he waved his hand as he came walking across the dooryard.

He gave them all a "howdy," and made a special thing out of shaking hands with Roy, whom he hadn't seen in quite a while.



"Why, you're sure lookin' good, Roy. I declare if you don't look more full of fire than ever."

"And I declare, Sam, if you aren't just as silver-tongued as always. I'll bet you've got every girl in Arizona all a-flutter."

"Why, shucks, I don't have time for anything like that. Always chasin' here, chasin' there; never get time for social doings."

"We hear you been pretty busy the last day or so, anyway," Bruce said. "Got time for coffee?"

"I'd sure like some, but I'd better not. We've got this manhunt under way, and there's not much time."

"I was in town yesterday to get Doc Caldwell," Bruce said. "He told about the trouble."

Sam Mason left off the chase long enough to inquire about the reason. "Somebody sick out here?" Sam looked from Bruce to Roy to Pete, and back to Bruce again. "Where's Juan?"

"Got a busted leg," Bruce said. "Horse fell on him. He's on crutches, though, already."

"Dawgone," Sam said. "Some men you got to shoot or hang, don't you?"

"I guess so," Bruce said. Bruce cleared a space on the hard-packed earth with his boot sole before he went on with it. "How's Tom Roberts getting on, Sam? Caldwell said it might be pretty close."

Sam didn't say anything right away. It was as if he was thinking up words to put it right. "Why, Bruce, he didn't make it. Went off about midnight."

"By golly, that's sure a shame," Roy said.

"I should say," Bruce said. "Tom was a nice man. I always liked him a whole lot."

Pete didn't say a word. His mind was filled with the vision of Tom Roberts lying stark and white, and with the roar of red-rimmed gunfire that had made him that way.

"I take it you haven't found your man yet," Bruce said after a little while.

Sam turned around and pointed at the far-off shape of Mingus Mountain rising blue and hazy beyond the Verde River. "He's up in there somewhere. We tracked him that far, then lost the trail. After that, Chris sent me down."

Sam was now looking kind of close at Bruce, and Bruce was once more working on the clear place in the dirt with his boot. Pete wondered if he had it right why Chris Johnson, who was the sheriff, should send Sam to see his pa.

"I don't have my dogs any more, Sam," Bruce said after a moment, and Pete knew his pa had seen it the same as he. "I sold out to Charlie Adams this spring."

"Oh, I know that. I stopped at his place on the way over here. He'd be glad to let you use them."

"Mighty nice of Charlie," Bruce said, and Pete thought he heard a vinegar sound to it. "Can't he run them for you?"

"Chris said he wanted the best tracker in the countryside." Sam Mason tipped his hat to Bruce and smiled. "To make sure I didn't go wrong, he gave your name special mention. I even got authority to deputize you."

"I guess I should be flattered at the compliment," Bruce said, and he tipped his own hat to Sam. "Truth is, though, I've got a roundup coming off. We're about to leave right now. Roy, here, has been kind enough to put his own business off a bit so he can take Juan's place, and we're heading out. I think we've got some trouble among the calves."

Sam Mason made a big thing of frowning at the ground.

"By golly, Bruce, I don't know what to say. I sure wish I could satisfy Chris with another man. If it was only robbery, likely any man who could call a hound would do. But there's been a killing."

Pete saw his pa turn and look away up the canyon, as if he were trying to put his eye on the calves so far away. It seemed there was something weighing heavily on his shoulders, because he didn't stand exactly straight.

"Well, all right," Bruce said in a moment. "I guess there's no helping it."

"I'm sure sorry," Sam Mason said. "I sure am."

"That's all right." Bruce looked at Sam, and then at Roy. "I'm much obliged to you, Roy, for offering to help. I guess you'd best follow up your own plans. We'll get this roundup over when Juan can ride again."

Roy put his thumbs in his belt and lounged against a gallery post. "I'm in no hurry, Bruce. You'll likely be back in a day or two; I can wait."

"A day or two might not do it, the way it sounds. I don't want to keep you from your own affairs."

"Well, I'll think it over," Roy said, and he grinned at Bruce. "I'll make my mind up when you're gone; then you won't have to worry about me."

Pete didn't say anything. Either way, he was out of it now. School was coming on too quickly to allow even a couple of days' delay. But his pa had to go, there was no way out. There had been a killing, and he had to go.

His pa was talking to him now. "I know this spoils it for you, Pete. I'll make it up to you later on, somehow."

"That's all right, Pa." It made Pete feel awkward that his pa should apologize this way.

"The elk season opens in a few weeks. Maybe we can plan a week-end hunt."

"That'd be fine," Pete said. "Don't worry about me."

Bruce smiled and poked Pete playfully on the arm. "All right, I won't. Would you saddle up?"

"Sure thing. Which one?"

"Hurricane, I think; ought to be all right." Bruce looked at Sam again. "What'll I need?"

"Just the horse and something warm. Going to be cold up that way. We got a base camp rigged up on the mountain; plenty of food, blankets, and such."

"All right, fine. You can saddle up, then, Pete."

Pete went around to the pasture and led Hurricane up to the shed on a hackamore. The buckskin horse seemed to understand that this meant business because he didn't fool around while Pete was rigging him. Pete was thinking, now, that he was disappointed, but he knew it was a selfish way to feel. It seemed especially that way when he remembered how his pa had stood with his shoulders heavy, looking up the canyon. With him it wasn't fun, it was a living.

Who could say how many more calves would be missing by the time he could get the cattle down?

Bruce rode off with Sam, his heavy cartridge belt around his middle, and his big revolver sagging on his leg. The sun sparkling on the brass cases exaggerated them beyond their true size, and they glittered in Pete's eye all the way to the ford, until the horses were over the creek and out of sight. And then they stayed in his mind, as reminders of the dangers his pa might be riding into.

It was pretty near noon by then and Pete kept himself busy by fixing chuck. Roy had gone to the pasture to see how Trigger was making out, but Juan came out of his room on the pearwood crutch, and shook his head over the way that things had gone.

"Maybe I should make a snake after all with this wood," he said. "The crutch did not do you much good. I hear everything through the window."

"Oh, I'm disappointed, sure, but I'll get to go one day. It bothers me most that pa can't get up there right away to see what's wrong."

Juan gave his head a little shake as though the nature of the trouble in the basin was away beyond him.

"Well, it could make a difference, the number of days he is gone," Juan said. "There are calves missing, that is certain. There could be more in time."

"That's what I was thinking, too. It's the early cold. In a week the basin will be full of predators."

"*Si,* yes, that could be." Juan was quiet for a moment, then a sly smile took possession of his face. "What about Roy?" he asked, and left it hanging there.

"He told Pa he was going to wait," Pete said. Pete glanced through the window toward the pasture. Roy had now come back to the corral, and Pete could see him sitting on the ground beside a post. He seemed to be gazing up the canyon.

"I heard him say that," Juan said, "but I was thinking beyond that." Juan was looking at Roy, too, and the sly smile still showed beneath his long mustachios.

All at once Pete thought he had stumbled onto something, and he looked at Roy again, and knew that Juan was watching him.

"You can only try," Juan said. "He may say 'no,' but you will not know until you ask."

"That's right," Pete said. "I sure won't, until I ask."

Pete started toward the door. Then he changed his mind and went through the kitchen door which opened on the side of the house, giving out on a small court which was hidden from the corral by a garden fence and the trunks of a pair of massive cottonwoods. He could see Roy's back and head sticking out beside the post, but Roy couldn't get a look at him.

The reata hung on a wall peg near the door, and he was careful about noise when he took it down. He waited until he got beneath the big shade of the cottonwoods before he shook his loop out, on account of the whirling shadow on sunny ground might draw Roy's eye around.

When he had quartered around to twenty or maybe twenty-five feet away from Roy, Pete let the loop sail out. There was plenty of slack and it traveled flat and free. It was such a good throw that Pete kind of wished that Roy had had a look at it. It was all the way out now, and seemed to hang before it settled. There was just a split second before it fell, and Pete was getting set to dig his heels in and dog him down.

Somewhere in that split second Roy moved. It wasn't much of a move at all, just like he dipped his head. Then his hand came over and caught the loop as it hit the ground.

Without so much as a look at Pete, Roy took it by the honda and raised it to the level of his head. When he brought it down again, quickly, a big snake jumped into the straight of the reata and headed Pete's way.

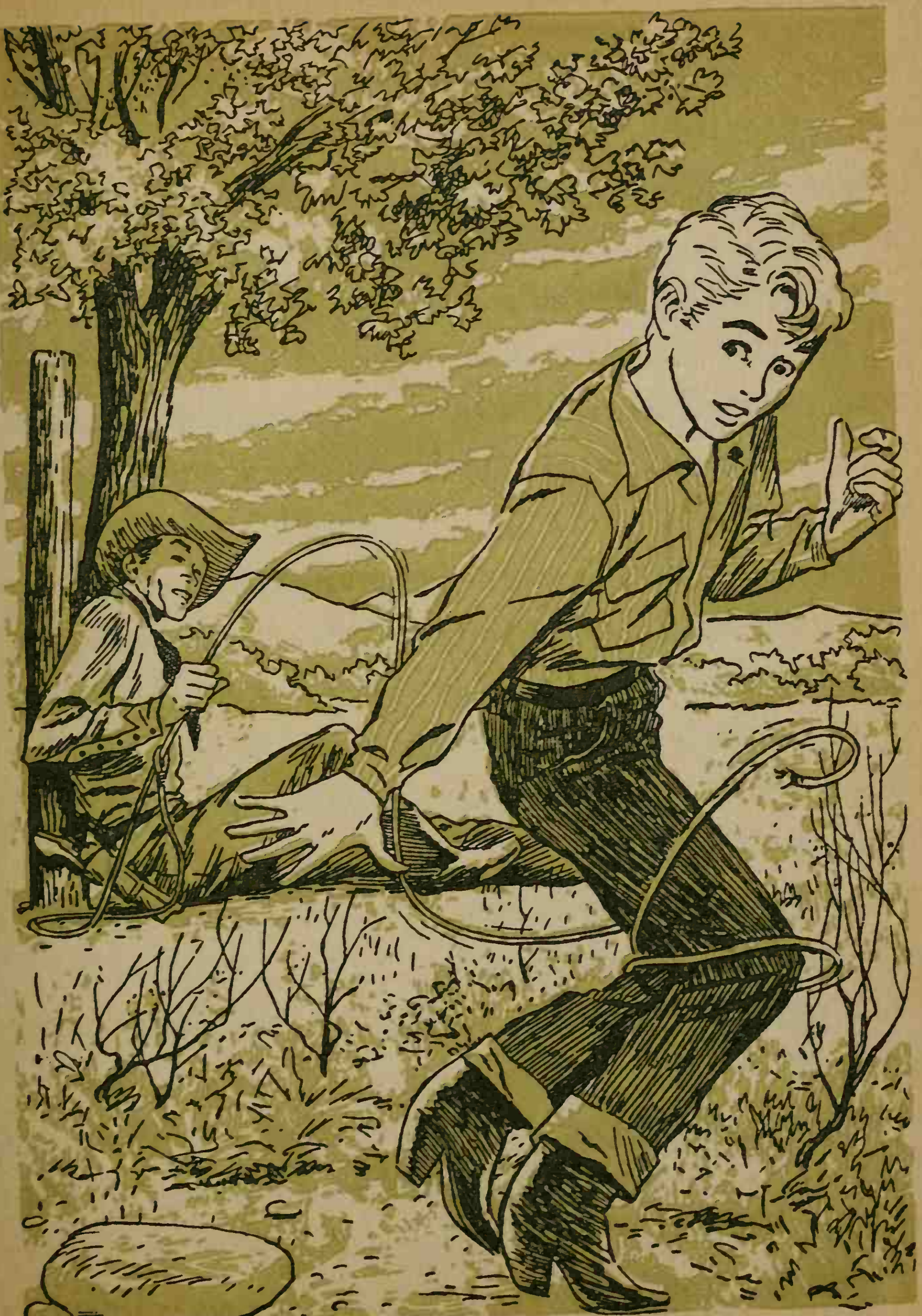
It looked to be about three feet high, and was moving plenty fast. It came like a sidewinding rattlesnake, and Pete stood rooted there, watching it; everything had changed so quickly he couldn't move. Then Roy moved his hand again and the snake leaped into the air. All at once it flipped over Pete's head and dropped and then caught up behind his knees, and pulled tight, and Pete was sitting on the ground.

Roy turned around, then, and grinned at him. "You're getting pretty good with that thing, Pete," he said.

Pete got up and coiled the rope and walked over to Roy, where he hunkered down beside him. "Not good enough to nail you down," Pete said.

"But good enough for cows, and that's all anybody needs," Roy said. "You won't find many critters grabbing your rope and throwing a snake back at you."

"We've got a few that're mean enough for it. Time they've spent the summer in the basin they're as wild as the deer they've seen."



Roy didn't say anything right away, and Pete wondered if this was a good time to talk to him.

"I expect you feel pretty bad," Roy said all of a sudden, and thus took the burden of it out of Pete's hands. It wouldn't be hard to work from there, now that it was started.

"I told Juan I felt worse for Pa," Pete said. "I came out here to ask if you thought we might go up anyway, just the two of us."

"Did Juan tell you to ask me that?" Roy was looking half amused, his eyebrows quizzical.

"No, he didn't say anything. He just rolled his eyes a few times. I guessed at what that meant."

Roy's smile turned to open laughter. "You sure can't beat Juan for eye-work."

"Well, what do you think?" Pete made little curlicues in the dusty ground with his finger.

"Pretty hard for just the two of us to bring the cattle down," Roy said.

"I know that," Pete said. "I don't aim to ride a bigger saddle than I'm fit for. But we could try, and we could see about the calves, maybe."

"I can't see your pa agreeing with that, Pete. He wouldn't want you moseying around up in that country without him along."

"But a lot more could be missing by the time he gets back." Pete looked over his shoulder at the mass of Mingus Mountain twenty miles away. "He could be gone a long time. Sam said they'd lost the trail, you know."

"Your pa knows all that, Pete. Sometimes you've got to cut your losses, and forget about them. I guess he figured this is one of those times."

"If we went, maybe we could save some of those losses." Pete didn't want to make an argument of it. He liked Roy too much for that, and respected what he said. But he was bound to find if he would give or not.

"Maybe we could," Roy said, "but it's not for me to say. I wouldn't be much of a friend to either you or your pa if I went around doing things behind his back."

"Would it be as bad as that?" Pete said. "Even if we meant to help?"

"It would be if something happened."

"What could?" Pete was wondering if Roy knew something, or suspected something, that he didn't.

Roy shrugged and poked at the dirt. Bullet came over to them and Pete rubbed him between the ears, waiting.

"I don't know of anything in particular, but we already have one man who got himself hurt up there. I'd never forgive myself if you got bent up like Juan."

Pete let it go for the moment, and they went in for chuck. He had the idea that Roy would maybe like to take a sashay to the basin, but that he wouldn't let that overcome the loyalty he had for Bruce.

As though to show there was nothing personal about refusing, Roy gave Pete a first-rate good time in the afternoon. He saddled up Trigger and showed Pete some of the tricks the golden horse knew. He took his rope down and made the moving loop dance like a live thing as he jumped in and out of it. He kept a tin can skating along the ground for fifty yards as he fanned his big revolver at it. Toward dusk they took a pair of fishing rods to a quiet pool in the creek and cast for trout. Bullet came along and spoiled the fishing by trying to catch his own, jumping at the dark shadows moving through the water. But it didn't make any difference, they were only having fun.

It was full dark when Pete went down to hand some sugar out to Molly and to Rusty, her quarter-horse colt. It was dark with no moon, but a sky full of starshine made near things plain to see, and far away things ghostly silver.

If he let his mind take off, a feller would see spooks every which way.

As soon as Pete leaned on the fence post at the pasture, the two horses began to cut around and kick like everything. You would think he was a lobo wolf come slavering through the grass the way they ran, then stopped and stuck their ears up at him. It took a while for them to make their show and then they got to thinking of the sugar, and they sidled over. They made a few more flurries to show their independence, but it wasn't long before they both had their noses in his hands.

Pete felt the little colt's lips nibbling at his hand, and he reached out with the other and rubbed the bump on top of his head. The starshine was so clear that he could see the reddish-brown coloring along his body, and along his legs, too, until they turned white around his ankles. He could see the white blaze on his face, and the liveliness shining in his eyes. Mostly, a Morgan's trimmings come in black, but his were white, except for tail and mane, which were black as night. He looked a good deal like his ma, and the signs all pointed to his having inherited her spirit, too.

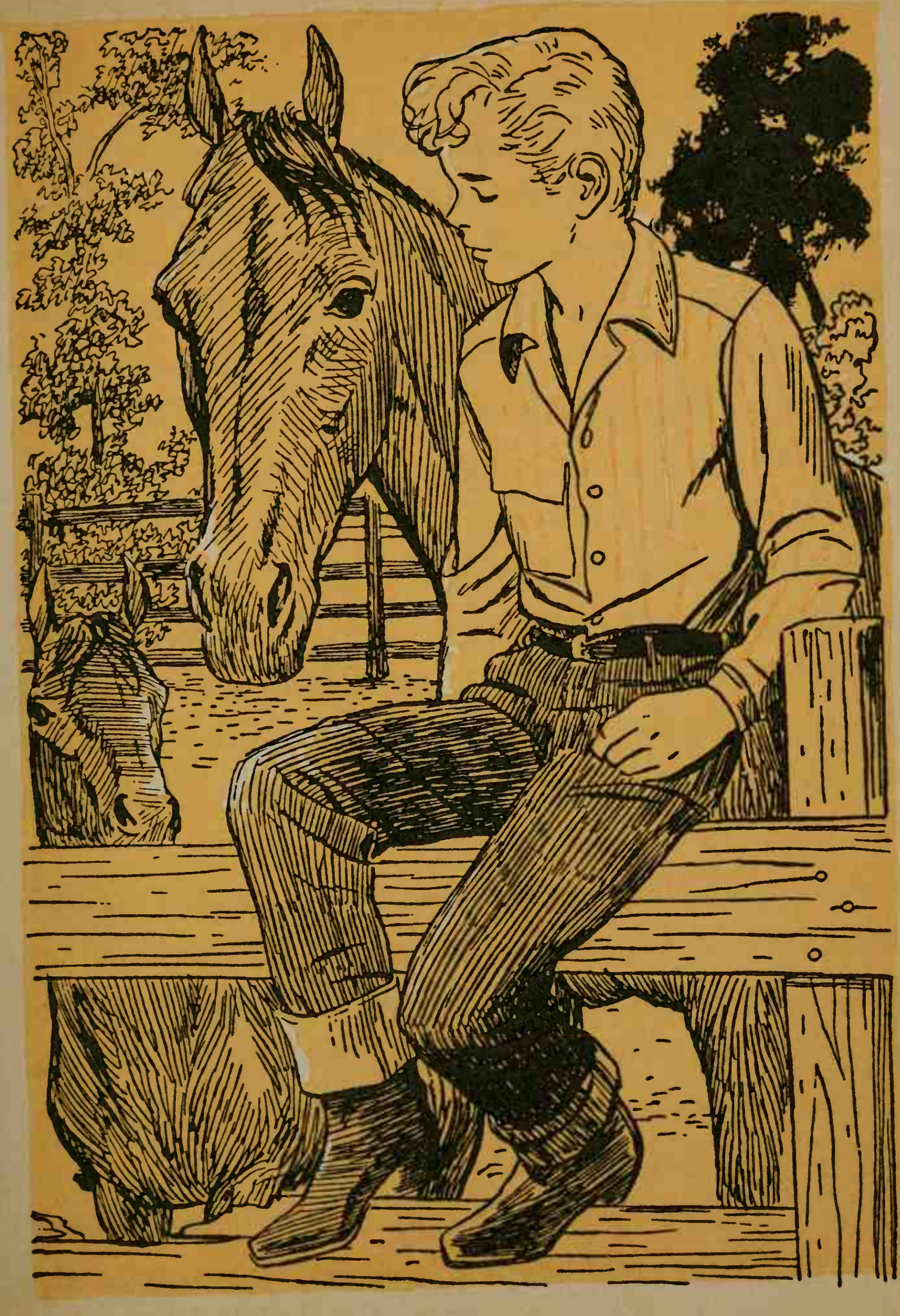
Except for the fence, Molly would be a couple of days away in the basin, a place she dearly loved. In the early springtime Juan had had to make a special hunt for her to bring her to the ranch in time to foal.

With the sugar gone, Pete walked along the fence to the gate, and sat on the top rail, looking down. The two horses followed him, and pretty soon Buck, a pretty bay horse, and Alex, and even Trigger, ambled over to the other two and sniffed them each around the nose as though to see if there wasn't any sugar left for them. When they saw there wasn't, they drifted off again.

But Molly and the colt stayed, and Pete wondered if the mare was thinking of the basin, the far-off dim side canyons she liked to wander in. He wondered if she would head for that country if she were allowed to go. She surely hadn't taken kindly to being cooped up in the pasture throughout the summer.

When the thought first came to Pete's head it startled him, and he backed off to look it over. Then he moved up to it again, and examined it. If Molly and the colt were to get away they would sure enough make tracks up the canyon, wouldn't they? And wouldn't it be necessary to go and find them right away?

He backed off again, and let the thought lie. He turned his mind around to something else. Far away, his eyes made



out the bulk and mystery of Mingus Mountain. The look of it made him think of Pa somewhere on those heights, maybe setting up his camp, or keeping after the belling dogs, hanging to the trail throughout the night.

Pa would want to get it over with, he thought. Pa would want to see about the calves. The cold on Mingus Mountain would be telling him that winter was on the way, that his stock was still grazing on its summer range. There wasn't much time.

Pete remembered the look on his father's face again, and his shoulders heavy with the lost calves running in his mind. He knew his Pa couldn't afford to lose any more of them.

Pete tried to keep his mind off the consequences as he climbed from the rail and put his hand on the gate. Roy wasn't going to like this, but anyway, Roy couldn't take the blame for it on himself. His pa wouldn't like it either, but if it served to save some stock from the coyotes he might not mind too much. Pete told himself he didn't care how mad anybody got if it helped.

He put his shoulder to the post, and swung the wire loop off the top, and pulled the gate open before he had a chance to change his mind. He didn't want to scare himself out of this thing now. It was wrong, but it was right, too. He was just a kid, but he knew he would never be a man unless he took things on himself now and then.

When they heard the gate creak and scrape the two horses chicked their ears at Pete, and right away Molly drifted over, Rusty tagging along behind her. The look of her ears said she maybe had an idea something different was going to happen.

Pete stood aside to give her plenty of room, and she didn't stall around any, but went right through, as though she had that crisp basin air in her nose already. Going by, Rusty took a sniff at Pete as though to ask him to explain this nighttime business to him, or maybe he still had sugar on his mind. Pete gave him a scratch along that bump between his ears.

Outside a few yards, Molly stopped and looked around. She turned her head and gave Pete a long look, then nuzzled Rusty, as if she was telling him they had a jaunt ahead.

"Go on, girl," Pete said in a soft voice. "Get going. We'll be seeing you in a day or two."

Then she turned her head again, looking north, her ears slanted so as to pick up every sound ahead, and started off. Once more, before the darkness took them in, Pete saw her nuzzle Rusty, as though to tell him not to be afraid—that if trouble came, she was strong enough to kick a coyote's head off.

CHAPTER 4 • Heading Out

Pete had it figured out to be first up in the morning so he could build a tale of Molly and Rusty getting out. But he didn't sleep too well, and it didn't work out the way he had planned. It was first light, cold and gray, when he awoke, and by the time he stumbled into his clothes he smelled bacon cooking in the kitchen. Juan was sitting awkwardly at the table underneath the kerosene lamp, and Roy was fussing with the vittles.

Something seemed to tell Pete they had been up quite a while.

It didn't seem as if they took note of Pete right off; he came in quietly, at an angle to them, and maybe they hadn't even seen him. Leastwise, they went right on talking back and forth to one another, and gave no sign that he was there.

"Oh, she is a smart one, Roy," Juan was saying, and Pete stopped near the door, still in the shadows of the darkened room behind him. "She is smart like any woman. Very deceiving she can be."

"I guess I thought Trigger had all the horse brains," Roy said musingly. "Something like this opens a man's eyes, though."

"Oh, she is not smart like Trigger," Juan said. "But she is sly, very different. She is just sly enough to get what she wants. But is that not enough?"

"I guess it is," Roy said. Roy had finished with the bacon, and he took it out of the pan and laid the cut strips on a piece of paper. Then he began to break the eggs into the bubbling grease. "I one time taught Trigger to open up the gate at my place, but he wouldn't think of doing it unless I asked him to."

"Oh, but Molly is like a headstrong *senorita,"* Juan said, and he shook his head as though that was something to be wary of. "She is very independent in her ways. If it pleases her, she will open any gate."

Pete stayed quiet near the door. He couldn't figure out what was going on. They seemed to know that Molly and the colt had taken off, but their talk about it didn't make sense to him.

"At first I thought they'd maybe hopped the fence," Roy said, "until I remembered that the colt could never make it. Then I looked around for tracks, and sure enough I found them by the gate."

"Ah-ha!" Juan cried. "And right straight through, they go."

"That's right. Straight through, and then they stopped for a minute on the outside."

"To close the gate behind them," Juan said. "She is sly, but sometimes she is thoughtful, too. She would not want the other horses to get out, as well."

"Like as not, she was thinking to save us the trouble of looking for them all," Roy said. The eggs were done and Pete saw Roy scoop them out of the pan and put them on the three plates he had waiting. When he had the bacon portioned out he brought the plates to the table, and then sat down at the long bench which ran the length of it.

All at once he glanced at Pete, and his face took on a look of vast surprise.

"Hello, Pete, when did you get up?"

And Juan turned around, with even more amazement, it seemed. "Hey, Pedro, she's plenty early in the morning. You should rest your brains for school."

Pete came slowly to the table and looked at them. There was something mischievous and peculiar in the eyes of each, and it gradually came over him that they weren't surprised at all. They had known he was standing there all the time. They had been having a game with him over Molly and the gate. But they knew he had let her out. They sure enough knew he had let her out.

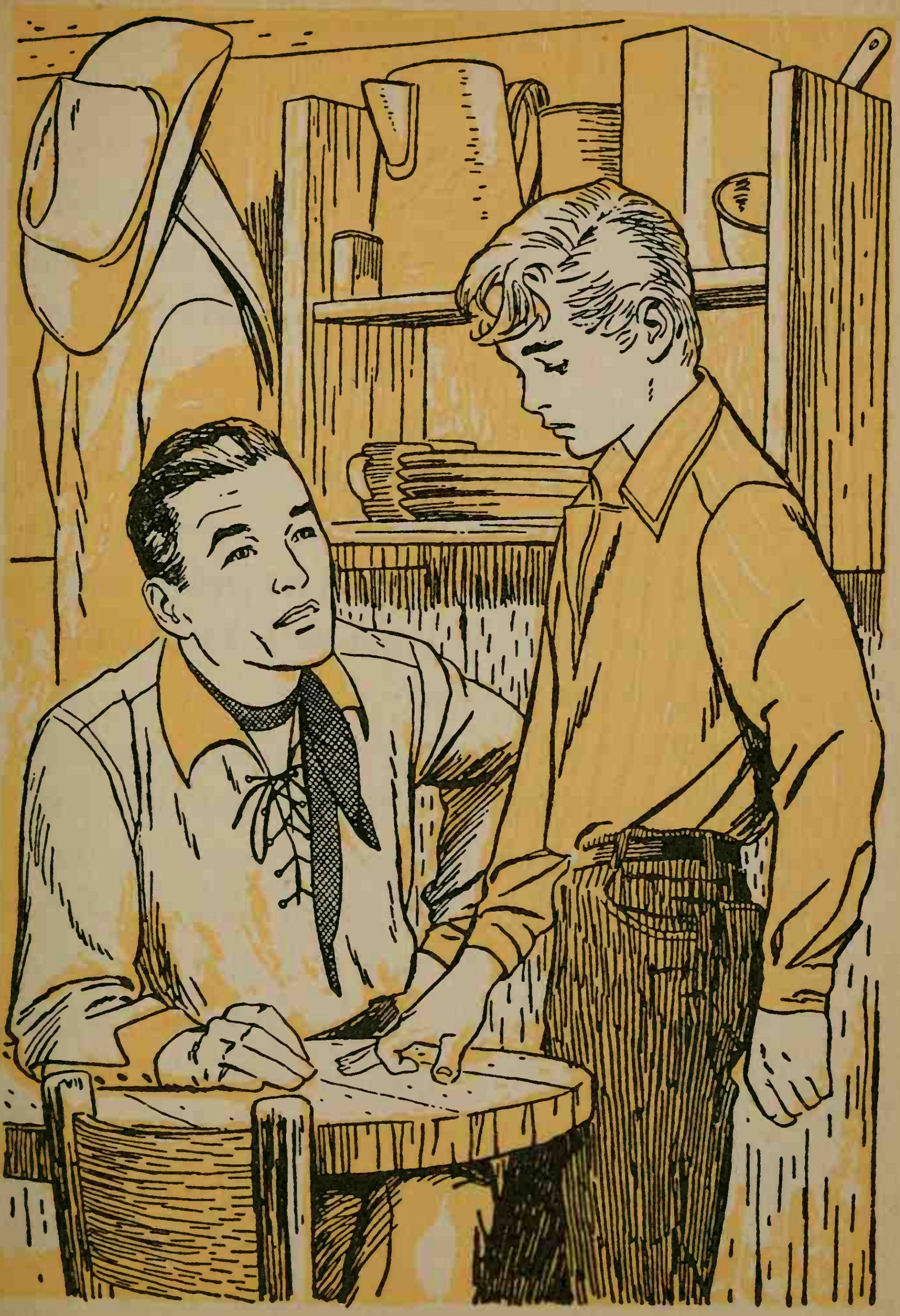
Juan was poking at his egg, now, and Roy wasn't smiling or teasing any more. Everything had changed again, and it wasn't funny. Pete knew he had been treated to a dose of cow-camp humor, but it was over now. The look on Roy's face made Pete feel uneasy and unhappy.

"I was up pretty early this morning," Roy was saying, "and took a turn around the place. That wasn't a very clever thing you did last night."

Pete shuffled his feet on the floor, and felt the warmth move into his neck and face.

"I guess it wasn't, Roy. I don't know what came over me. I all at once let them out."

"I thought you had a lot of savvy, Pete. I had in mind you were a first-class buckaroo." Nothing moved about Roy except his lips. The flicker of the overhead lamp made queer shadows on his face.



Pete felt pretty awful now. It came over him that he had betrayed Roy, somehow.

"I didn't think, I guess," he said. "I figured if I let them out we'd have a reason to go to the basin, and you couldn't take the blame on yourself for doing it. I thought to help my pa."

"We'll have to go, all right. You got what you wanted. We'll have to get those horses back here."

Pete stared down at the streaked grain in the wood of the table top. He felt sick inside. He tried to think what crazy thing had made him turn the horses loose. His mouth was dry, as if it were full of trail dust.

"I'll go. I didn't mean to do you wrong. I'll go find them."

"No. We'll go together." A change came into Roy's voice, and Pete looked up. There was movement in Roy's face now, there was the turn of a smile about the corners of his mouth. "I don't like to have a deadfall dropped on me, Pete," he was going on, "but I have to say I admire your loyalty to your pa."

"I wanted to help, Roy. I'd never have done it otherwise." Pete sat down on the bench. All at once he felt he weighed about five pounds. His conscience, easy now, must have weighed a million.

"You better eat, now," Roy said. "We have to hurry."

"All right," Pete said. "I don't think there's anything to worry over, though. Molly can take care of all the coyotes in the basin."

"I wasn't thinking of the coyotes," Roy said between forkfuls.

"I doubt a lion would take her on, either," Pete said. He wasn't quite sure just what Roy meant.

"I wasn't thinking of lions," Roy said.

Pete looked at Roy, and then Juan. He wondered what else they had been talking of before he showed up.

"What is it?" he said, and he felt his skin get cold, as if he had just come out of a bath and couldn't find the towel.

"I don't know for sure," Roy said. "It's just a notion that I got. Can't say till we check the sign. But we'd better saddle up and ride."

Pete did his best to keep the thought of the unknown menace out of his mind. He had been speculating on the nature of it ever since they left the spread half an hour back, but it only served to make him feel uneasy. He already had plenty of misgivings plaguing him, and thinking of this other matter didn't help. And he wasn't going to get it out of Roy; not yet, at least.

He was riding Buck, and he touched the bay horse with his heels and moved it past the packhorse, Alex, which was strung out on a hackamore behind Roy and Trigger. He wanted to talk to Roy, and it was hard work shouting back and forth when they let a lot of space open up between them.

"Do you think we can make it to Ben's tonight?" Pete said. He had got aside of Roy now. The trail was wide along the creek in these lower elevations and there was plenty of room to ride abreast.

"I kind of planned to," Roy said. "We ought to get in about sundown. As I remember, it's an easy day's ride, even with a packhorse tagging along."

"I guess that's about it," Pete said, and he wished he could be as sure about it as Roy seemed to be. Again, he thought how peculiar it was that Roy should know this canyon country better than himself. But Roy had been all through here many times before.

"I meant to ask Juan how Ben was getting on," Pete said, "but I guess so much happened I forgot to. And I don't remember his saying anything on his own."

"I talked to him about it for a while this morning, early," Roy said, and he stole a smiling glance at Pete. "While we were waiting for you to wake up. We talked over quite a few things."

"I guess you did, at that," Pete said, and he was grateful for the smile. But he felt red and warm again, just the same, and the thought of the dressing-down he had from Roy made him hitch himself self-consciously in the saddle, and tug his hat down tighter.

"What'd he say about Ben?" Pete asked once he had himself adjusted.

"Well, not a whole lot," Roy said. "Said he didn't see him either way, coming or going."

"Ben might have been up in one of his diggings," Pete said. "He's got 'em all around the canyon there, and some are pretty far off the trail."

"He figured that way, too. Juan said he didn't give much thought to him on the way up, and didn't dare stop to hunt for him coming back. Just had to stay on his horse and keep on coming."

Just then Bullet came out of a screen of brush to one side of the trail, turned to wag his tail at them, then disappeared into some serviceberry bushes on the other side. Sight of the dog seemed to remind Roy of something.

"Juan said he saw Ben's dog, though."

"Ben had an old Bluetick hound one time," Pete said, feeling glad he could give out something definite.

"It must be the same one, still. That's what Juan said it was. He said it surely acted queer, though. It was racing around the canyon, in and out of brush, yowping and cutting up. Then again, it'd take to slinking off aways with its tail between its legs."

"That sure sounds funny to me, all right," Pete said, and he sought in his mind to place the behavior of Ben's Bluetick hound as he remembered it. "Seems to me that old dog mostly slept."

"Well, something had it stirred up, that's certain. Maybe Ben can tell us when we get there."

Pete wondered why Ben's dog should have any interest for Roy, but the question didn't seem big enough to ask it. They rode quietly for a while. There was a big silence when neither of them was talking, and the horses' footsteps hardly began to fill it. Pete became conscious of the easy way that Roy sat in his saddle, as if he hardly thought about it. He hoped he could some day ride a horse with such ease and authority.

The day was pretty well past dawn now, and Pete began to look around. The land was filling up with light and color, and he thought again how dawn and dusk were the prettiest times of the day for him.

Everything was changing, then, but quietly, and there seemed to be a mysterious, waiting feeling in the air. Most anything could happen, it occurred to him, at such a time.

Pete looked up and saw the canyon cliffs bold and sharp against the soft light spreading through the sky. Those facing east had caught the first rays of the sun, but down below, the trail still wound through blue and purple. Off the trail a ways, the stream flowed deep and black, and Pete could follow the turn and twist of it ahead where it changed to gray, and finally to silver from the light reflecting down from overhead.

Near the place he lost it, a couple of miles ahead, a peak rose up above the canyon altogether, and the top of it burned bloody scarlet in the sunlight.

They were a good while out by now, but the spread was still in sight, far away and down. The floor of the canyon had pitched up in the distance covered, putting them a ways above the level of the buildings relaxing in the clear light where the canyon widened at its mouth and the sun flooded everything with brilliant colors.

Pete could see where Juan had put some new shingles on the house roof a while ago, the look of them like newly-minted pennies in the sun. The cottonwoods and sycamores were shining bright and green, except in places where the leaves were paling out. In a couple of weeks, with frost coming on, they would look like clouds of gold above the buildings.

Then they went around a bend and when Pete looked back again the spread was gone from sight. It was just as though the canyon floor had opened up and swallowed it. It was as if there had been the possibility of turning back before, but now they couldn't. Until then, Molly and the colt going off could have been some kind of dream.

All at once Pete got a lonesome feeling, seeing how the broken walls went up forever, and the stream came tumbling by. He had been cut off from everything he knew.

He had slipped back pretty near abreast of Alex, but now he nudged with his heels, and moved the bay horse up again.

"Roy," he said, "I guess I fixed us up a sight of work to do, didn't I?"

Roy turned his head and smiled at Pete. Maybe he had a notion how he felt, as if all their bridges had been burned behind them.

"You sure did, Pete," Roy said, and Pete felt better for the smile. "For a boy, you did a real he-man's job of it."

CHAPTER 5 • Ben Tate's Answers

It was pretty close to sundown when Ben Tate's old Bluetick hound rambled down the trail and bellowed at them. He had got himself all horns and rattles at the thought of someone riding through, but changed his mind again when Bullet came into sight. Bullet curled his lips and made noises in his throat, but he stayed close, as Roy commanded. The look of him was enough to send the Bluetick skulking into the brush aside the trail, and though they couldn't see him any more, they could hear him in there sassing and complaining.

Ben's place was a little more than two-thirds of the way to the basin. He had come into the country a dozen years or so after Pete's grandpa came, and Grandpa used to tell about their two-day battle to see who was going to run that canyon country, and who was going to leave. By the time they had both burned up their ammunition they were so impressed with one another that they had called it quits.

Sometimes Pete wondered if Ben wasn't kind of sorry Grandpa hadn't chased him out, since he had never struck pay dirt in that place. Juan said Ben stayed there just to show Grandpa's *espiritu* he wasn't giving in, no matter what.

Ben didn't have much to show for all the sixty years and more he had spent there. He had half a dozen shafts entered in the cliff wall and a sagging shack down by the stream, with hollyhocks growing up the sides of it. He kept a few chickens, together with a drowsy burro, in a brush corral. As they came in sight of it, the burro was sound asleep standing on three legs, and he didn't move an ear when they swung down from their horses and walked toward the door.

Ben came out of the shack and chunked a stick of firewood off into the brush toward the bellowing of the Bluetick. Ben was all beard and white hair gone awry, and his mouth was like the door of an oven as he shouted at the Bluetick, and heaved the stick. The hound showed for a second, with its hair still ridged along its spine, and its eyes rolling; then Bullet made another noise, and it disappeared again.

"That's a sure-enough ornery dog you have, Ben," Roy said as he slipped the saddle off Trigger's back. "What's eating him, anyway?"

"Well, if it ain't Roy Rogers," Ben said, and then he looked at Bullet, sitting on the ground. "Why it must be the smell of that wolf you got aside you there," Ben said. "He don't ordinarily carry on that way, no, sirree—not that feller."

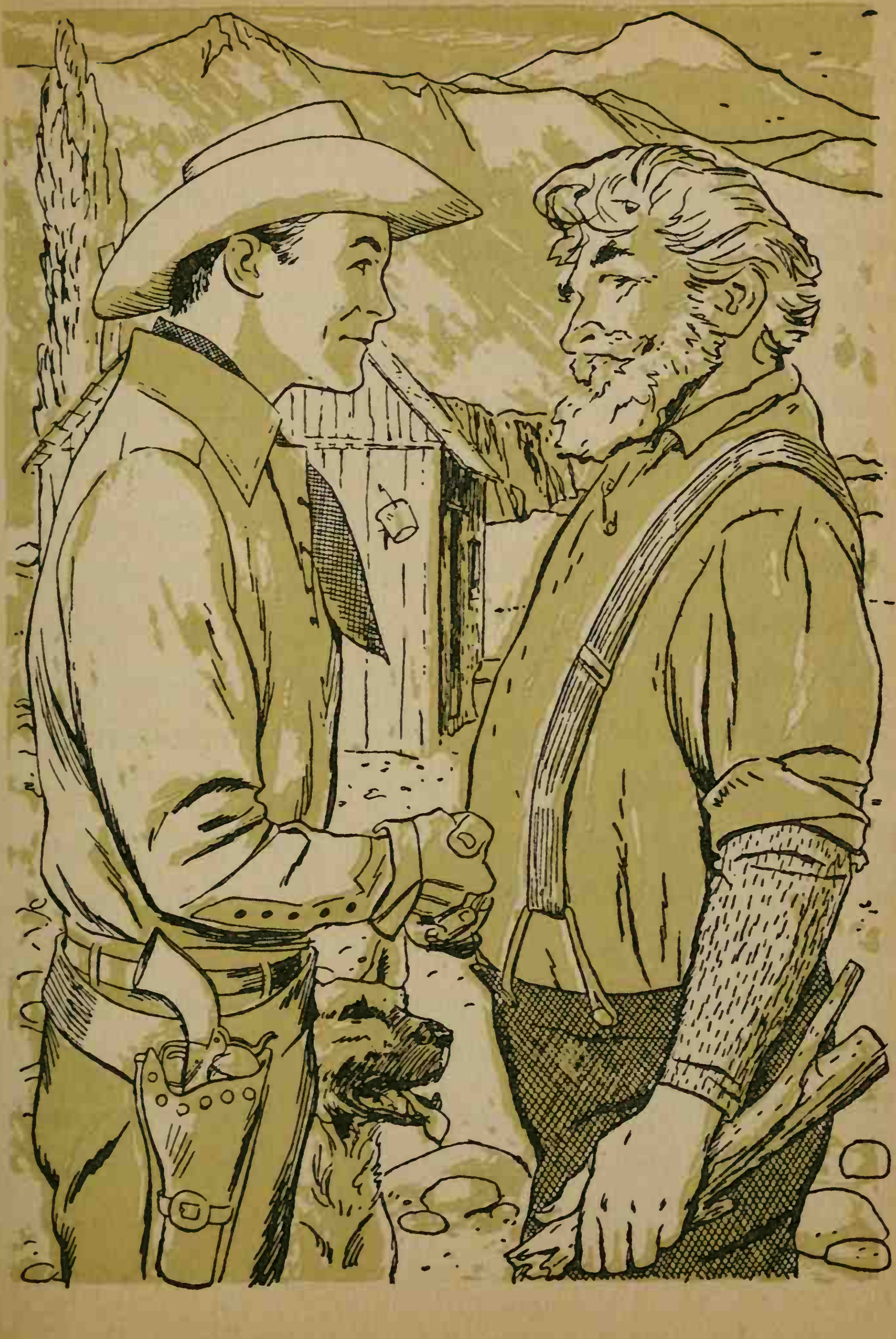
"He's no wolf," Roy said. "He only strains from the wolf, but far back."

"Little bit must go a long ways with the hound, then," Ben said. "That Bluetick's a sleeper, mostly."

"Now, that's funny," Roy said, "but Juan went through here the other day and he said your hound was taking on at that time, too."

"Juan went through?" Ben said, surprised-like. "I sure didn't see him."

"He said he didn't see you either. His leg was busted and he could have used some help. But he heard the hound carrying on, and saw it. That could have told you someone was out here."



"He said that?" Ben was still acting surprised to hear about Juan, and Pete wondered if it was genuine or not. It seemed to him that Roy was fishing around for something, and that Ben was aware of it.

"He sure did say that," Roy said, and waited as though expecting further explanation.

"Why, he must have been dreaming that; likely the pain of his leg had him hearing things." Ben stopped for a moment and tugged at his beard and stared off into the brush. "Else I was up in one of my diggings. That must have been the way it was."

"It could have been that way," Roy said. "But it still doesn't explain about the dog." Then, just when Pete thought they were getting onto something, Roy changed the subject, as though the matter was of small importance, after all. "I guess it's all right if we spread our bedrolls out here tonight, isn't it?"

"Why, I guess it is; you can spread 'em out most anywhere." Ben didn't seem enthusiastic, but it was clear he was relieved to have the conversation switch around to something else. Pete wished he knew the old man better, so he could tell more about his manner. Somehow, the idea was growing that they weren't very welcome. He just couldn't shake off this disturbing feeling.

He remembered the calves, then, and Molly and Rusty going through—as they likely had—and he thought to ask about them, but it must have been that Roy was way ahead of him because Roy's eyes bored into him, and he shook his head ever so slightly.

But either way, the chance was gone for then, at least, because old Ben was moving toward the shack, talking over his shoulder as he went.

"I was just fixing up some vittles," he was saying, and his beard tossed and waved with his jaw moving up and down. "I got a nice little stew working on the fire. On account of that hound cuttin' up like that, you two can have his share."

"Well, I sure don't like to take food out of a dog's mouth," Roy said, and Pete saw a smile move across his face.

"Don't bother your head about it," Ben said, waving in the general direction of his dog. "He's plenty fat as he is. Do him good to eat less."

The door to Ben's shack was open, and they followed him inside. There was only one room, no bigger than a hen house. With the old iron stove, the bed, Ben's trash collection, and the three of them, there was hardly space to breathe.

"I figure we better rig this feed outdoors," Ben said when he looked the situation over. "We'll be eatin' on each other's elbows if we stay in here."

When they were outside again Roy went over and let go the diamond hitch that held the pack on Alex, and got a pair of tin plates and forks out of the tow sack holding all the cooking gear. In a couple of minutes Ben brought the stew bucket out in a cloud of fragrant steam and set it on a flat rock out in front. He threw a couple of tanned cowhides on the ground for them to sit upon. Pete could tell by the brand they were relics of his feuding days with Grandpa. The mark was worn and faded, but he could read it.

"Nothing like a steer hide for settin' on," Ben was saying now as he stirred the stew and began to ladle it upon the plates. "I always say they're better'n ary a chair. They don't deform the back and shoulders. It seems to me a man gets himself closer to God and nature settin' on a hide." And he motioned them to sit down.

Neither Roy nor Pete said anything right away. Pete now had the idea Roy was waiting for an opening to steer the talk around to something else, but it looked like the hide talk had a grip on Ben and he'd never stop.

"There's hardly a thing a nice hide can't be used for," Ben went on. "I been settin' on these for pretty near sixty years. I sleep underneath 'em, too. I sometimes think there's something in the make of them that seeps into a man just from touching them and getting close. I got an idea they tend to rejuvenate him."

Pete ate the good stew and listened to Ben go on. Folks that lived alone, like him, didn't often get a chance for talk unless it was with their animals. They got a heap of chatter stored up inside them in the stretch of time passing between one human being and the next.

It was plenty nice sitting in the early evening. The air was starting in to cool, but it was comfortable. There was light in the canyon, still, and a lot of color overhead from the sun going down beyond the cliffs.

Ben's hair and beard turned red, then lavender, then red again, as the sky put on its moods and took them off. Ben ate and talked and waved his spoon for emphasis, and in the brush corral the burro dozed and the chickens clucked. The horses grazed out to the length of their picket ropes, and the dogs gnawed on some chunks of jerky which Roy and Pete had brought along.

So long as they were eating the Bluetick's stew, it was only fair they make a trade.

"I wonder if you've seen a mare and a colt go through here," Roy said after a while, but old Ben only waved his spoon again, and rambled on.

He was putting his eyes on Pete, now, as he went ahead with what he had to say.

"I mind the time I fit the battle with your grandpap, sonny," he said. "I didn't have but three, four feet entered in my first shaft, and the look of it was mighty interesting. I was plenty put out at being interrupted at such a time, as anyone would be."

It was solid dark by then and the stars were out. The stew was finished and Bullet was licking at the pot; the Bluetick had gone belling up the creek again, else they might have fought a little about it. The night was still and peaceful.

Ben had built a little fire aside the rock, and they were all taking their ease about it, sprawling on the steer hides. Pete was wondering when Roy would be able to lead the talk around to the calves and horses, but it began to look as though they would have to wait till Ben ran down. It almost seemed as if Ben didn't want to talk about such things.

"Your grandpap brought a big Sharps buffalo gun with him," Ben was saying now. "I didn't have a thing but this old Henry rifle in my outfit. It was a good enough gun, but lacked the authority of the Sharps. Every time your grandpap triggered off the big one I could feel the walls of the canyon shaking."

Ben raised his spoon and sighted on the far-off cliff as if he were going to make it shake himself.

"This scrap went on for most of two days. After we had the canyon so full of powder smoke we couldn't hardly tell if it was light or dark, we kind of took it easy for a while. We snuck around behind rocks and such, trying to get a pot shot at one another."

Ben Tate scrunched and humped around on the steer hide so Roy and Pete could see exactly how they did this. Once he drew a bead on the burro with the spoon, squinting fiercely along the handle.

"I guess your grandpap had it figured out he could do me easy. He hadn't planned on being up here quite so long. Come dark I forted up behind a boulder and put a kettle of my stew on a little fire I'd put together. The wind was just right, and the smell of that cooking pretty near unhinged his mind."

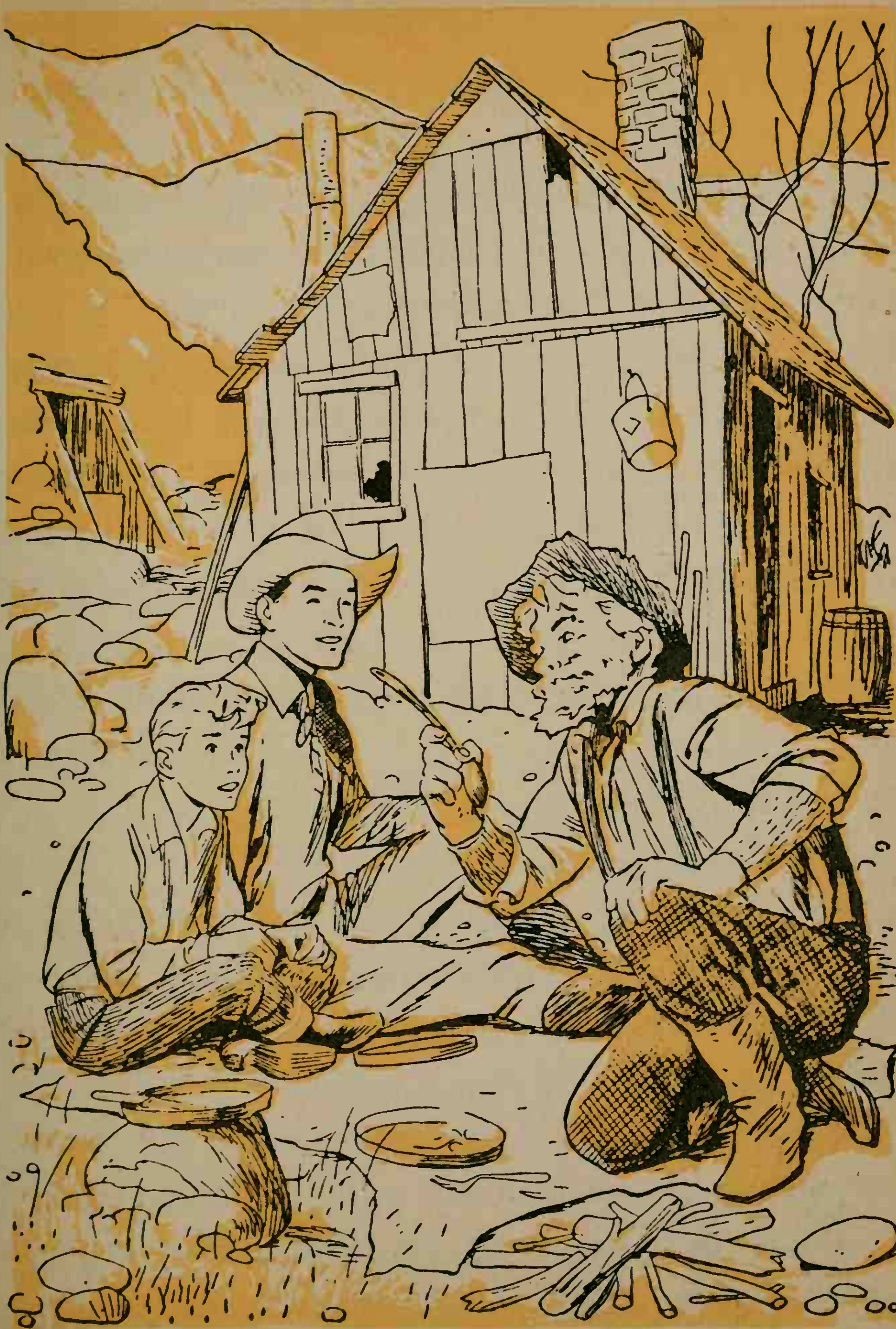
Ben shifted his legs on the steer hide, and arranged himself in a more comfortable position. His eyes filled up with time as he looked into that bygone day.

"We was pretty low on shootin' fodder come morning. We'd about reached the point of throwin' rocks at one another. On account of I thought he might do something desperate, I hitched around and slunk into my digging. He'd have me pinned in there, but he'd never get behind me."

Old Ben writhed and squirmed across the hide. It was like the stage in a theater to him. He lived out every motion of his tale.

"Pretty soon he had it figured where I was. I got a glimpse of him working for a vantage point. Except I somehow lost the remainder of my ammunition gettin' in the digging, I could have dropped him then and there. Things had got to be looking kind of bad for me."

Ben put this doubtful, worried look upon his face to show how the anxiety had grown upon him. Pete realized he had his knees drawn up, hanging on. He had pretty nearly forgotten about Molly and the colt altogether. He



was in that digging with old Ben.

"He took a long time drawing his bead on me. Gradually, it came to me he had his last round in the chamber; he hadn't been so saving of his bullets up to then, except when it was night. I made myself into a ball no bigger than a piñon nut, and waited. Pretty soon there came the roar of the gun, and then a terrible crash behind me. I must have jumped ten feet up in the air. I thought there'd been some kind of a cave-in back behind me."

Pete guessed he jumped a foot or two, himself. Grandpa had one time taken the old Sharps down from the fireplace and had shot it for him. He never forgot the awful sound it made.

"Did he hit you?" Pete said. He didn't mean to interrupt, but he was gathered into the story now.

"He hit the ceiling of my digging," Ben Tate said. "He hit the ceiling and opened up a seam a foot wide and a yard long. It was filled with yellow metal shining in the morning sun."

"Gold!" Pete said; he nearly shouted it. "The Sharps struck gold for you!"

Ben moved himself around on the hide a bit to give the suspense a chance to build a little. Pete felt himself sitting straight up like a bayonet. Even Roy wasn't sitting so free and easy.

"I said the same thing," Ben continued when he thought the other two were properly expectant. "As a matter of fact, I yelled it so loud your grandpap dropped the Sharps and came a-running. We got so busy grubbing around in that stuff we forgot all about the fight."

"Grandpa told about the fight a little," Pete said, "but he never said there was any gold up here."

"Well, it turned out there wasn't any, after all. It was only iron pyrites. A good thing it was, too, maybe, come to think of it. We had a good laugh over it, an' we never fought again."

There was a quiet after Ben finished. Pete heard the stream flowing in the night, and in the distance the Bluetick rampaging through the brush. If it was Bullet that bothered him, how come he was cutting up so far away?

"That's a nice tale, Ben," Roy said after a little bit. "We surely thank you for it. I wonder if you can tell us something else."

"What's that?" Ben said, and Pete wondered why the old man's face should all at once seem guarded and secretive.

"We're looking for a Morgan mare and her colt that got away last night. The sign says they headed through the canyon toward the basin. We wonder if you've seen anything of them."

"Ain't seen nothin'," Ben said with hardly a pause for thought. Ben was all at once busy putting sand in the stew bucket to cut the grease.

"We're kind of curious about some missing calves, too," Roy went on. "Juan said he thought there seemed to be some missing. You live pretty close to the basin, and we thought you might have a notion about the predators coming down."

"Don't know nothin' about that neither." Now Ben was heaping sand upon the sparks and glowing wood. The dark came down from the sky and made his face obscure. "I spend all my time in my diggin'," he added. "Don't know nothing about anything, but that."

There didn't seem to be any more to say. Roy and Pete untied their bedrolls and turned in. Pete wanted to talk about Ben's reluctance to help them out, but Roy put his finger to his lips. In the morning they rolled out and shoved off right away. It was scarcely dawn, but Ben had already headed for his digging, and they didn't get a chance to talk to him again. They rode slowly along the stream and didn't say very much until they were well beyond Ben's shack. When they heard the Bluetick yowling far away against the cliff, Pete couldn't hold his thoughts inside him any longer.

"I don't think Bullet had anything to do with that hound taking on," he said.

"I don't either," Roy said. Roy was staring at the soft ground aside the stream, and didn't lift his head. "That's just something he put together."

Pete thought before he spoke again. "If he didn't see the colt come by, maybe we ought to head back the other way."

"No, I think we'd best keep going toward the basin," Roy said.

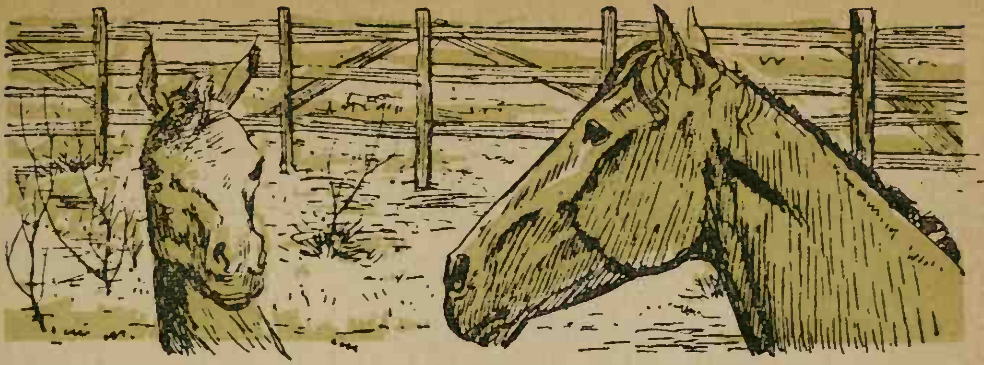
"But we didn't learn anything from Ben about him, or his ma."

"Didn't need to," Roy said. "I learned it from the sign. They've been along here, all right. Every now and then there's a mark in the soft ground."

"Do you think Ben knew about it?" Pete said. A dark thought came to his mind, and he hoped he wasn't right. "Maybe he was in his digging all the time, like he said."

"Maybe so," Roy said. "Maybe he didn't know about a thing going by—Juan, the colt, or Molly. On the other hand, maybe he was lying."

And Roy had come upon the dark thought, too. But why would Ben be lying?



CHAPTER 6 • Sign of a Killer

It was a little after noon by the time they showed up at the basin. They had been going through the canyon up above Ben Tate's all morning, following every turn and twist of it, when all at once they were out of it, and the country opened up. There was no kind of warning given; it simply happened all at once, when they came around a bend. Pete saw the sudden emptiness ahead, and then saw the other side, with the Rim rising and the pinnacles and mountains in the middle, and the black slashes in the walls where the side canyons entered, but so far away it made his eyes ache.

Coming into the basin for the first time must be like entering one of those old cathedrals that you read about in school, Pete thought. He had the feeling of stained glass windows and far-off organ music playing strong and brave and coming from everywhere around.

It might be old stuff to Roy, who had been pretty near everywhere in the West, but Pete didn't think he would ever cease to wonder at it. It wasn't easy to put any kind of measure to the place. If he stepped it off, he might come up with a figure of five or six miles across and maybe eight or ten long, but that wouldn't begin to give an idea of it.

It didn't take into account the walls going up for half a mile and better, and circling all around to enclose the basin, and all red and orange and cream and silver and maroon and blue, depending on the time of day. It didn't account for the monuments lifting from the floor of it out ahead; going up higher than the Rim itself, and wild and unknown on the tops of them, for their sides were too steep and smooth to climb. Nor the air, which was clear as glass, and made everything closer than it really was; nor the silence, which was immense and everywhere.

Pete thought there ought to be some kind of sound there, and there likely was, only the biggest noise on earth would be hard put to make an impression in all that emptiness and vastness.

There were different kinds of trees and such growing in the basin and on the Rim above. The country there was somewhat higher than down below where the ranch was. There wasn't any more prickly pear like that which a man could come upon around the spread. And the cottonwoods and sycamores had thinned out quite a bit along the watercourse. A person wouldn't see but one or two every now and then. This was chilly country up this way, and the trees and other plants all conformed to it.

The basin was a bowl, mostly filled with grass, broken by the random monuments or every now and then by an isolated grove or juniper or pine, sometimes oak. The stream came off the head wall on the north and spilled on down half a dozen waterfalls until it hit the floor and commenced to hunt around for some way out. It was white, rough water for more than a quarter of the distance to the canyon entrance. It took a while to settle down and make its mind up.

When a person looked at the basin for the first time, he got the idea it was level all the way across except where the pinnacles rose up, but it wasn't anything like that. It must be the size of it made it seem that way, Pete thought, like looking at the moon at night all smooth and even to the eye so far away. But after he got into it a way, a person saw the grassy ridges lifting up and letting down, the broad, flat knolls, and the swales, some wide and shallow, and others deep. A person had to ride the ridges to keep the country in good view.

The trees commenced on the Rim and came down carefully in steps. It was as if they knew they could come into the basin only just so far and still make a go of it. They had everything their own way up above, but in the basin the grass sort of ran things.

On the high Rim stood the spruce and giant Ponderosa pine. Those stepping off to make their way down the cliffs were pine, too, a lot of them, and cedar, but they were smaller, with a tough and wiry look to them; they were plenty spare and hardy from clinging to the fractures in the rock.

The regular line of trees drew up where the cliffs came from the floor, and stopped. It seemed as though they had come about as far as they dared for the time, and were waiting there to see what was going to happen next. They looked a lot like a bunch of boys gathered by a pond, hanging back for a brave one to dive in first and test the water.

Between the end of the trees and the grass there was a belt, a low brushy business spreading out. This was mostly red-barked manzanita, serviceberry, and that kind of ever-green that grows sidewise instead of up. Every now and then Pete would see a piñon or a juniper lifting higher than the rest.

Pete figured it wouldn't be right to say the trees stopped dead at the base of the cliffs. Once in a while there would be an island of them far out in the basin, all huddled up. They were some of those brave ones who had taken it upon themselves to be adventurous and look the country over.

Those trees were mostly pine and piñon, but here and there, along the stream bed in particular, clumps of aspen grew. Pete thought these gatherings bigger than they first looked. They just seemed small and lost, for all the endless spread of rolling, lifting, falling land around them.

He had forgotten the basin was put together of such immensities. Now the bigness of it put him in mind of seeing the ranch for the last time as they had gone around that bend toward Ben Tate's.

But for Roy aside him, he would have been as lonely and as lost as those remote and distant clumps of trees.

"This looks pretty good in here, don't you think, Roy?" Pete asked. "Near to water, and those trees give a windbreak, should we need it."

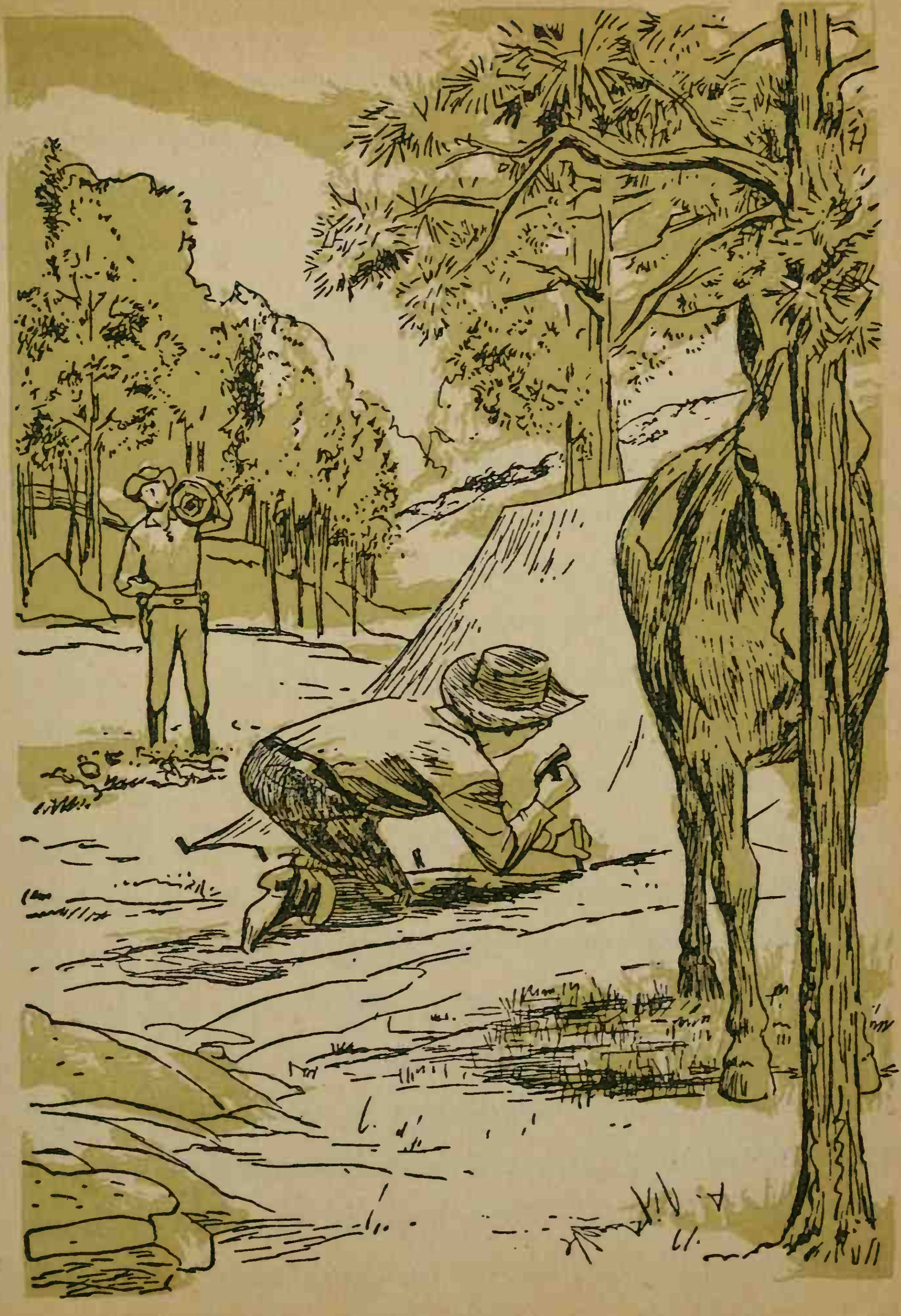
"Looks as good as any, for now, anyway," Roy said. "We might as well set up here until we have a look around."

Roy sat for a moment and looked the country over. They were in a kind of swale beside the creek, maybe two-thirds of the way across the basin, northwest. There was a grove of pine between them and the nearest cliff, and half a dozen aspens growing near the water. They hadn't moved very fast coming over, because they were keeping their eyes peeled for the cattle, and now it was getting beyond the middle of the afternoon.

Then Roy moved his head a few times, as though that signified he had made his mind up definitely, and they both got down. They had been in the saddle so much the last couple of days that Pete felt a little rocky for a moment, until the land steadied under him. He wondered if he would ever be like Roy, who could ride all day, every day, for weeks on end, and never think of it.

Sometimes he wondered if his pa was fooling when he said that Roy was half horse, anyway.

There wasn't much to getting things laid out. They only had their cooking gear and bedrolls, some food, and a shelter in case of weather. Getting Alex unpacked didn't take but a little while, and after he had had himself a roll



and a drink, Pete strung the packhorse on a picket rope. They didn't want to have to hunt him out along with all the other stock, and this being such a wide, free piece of country, he might take a notion of some kind.

It was getting on by then, but there was still an hour or so before the light would fail. Pete was kind of anxious to have a look around, and he could tell Roy had a hanker for it, too. They had seen a few head of stock scattered here and there, but Pete had his mind on Rusty and his ma. It would be a nice thing to bring them into camp by night.

"We might as well make the best of what daylight remains," Roy said when they had their camp set.

"I expect we ought to look for Rusty and Molly, first," Pete said, and he hoped Roy would see it that way, too.

"I think we better do just that," Roy said, but his way with it made Pete wonder if he was glad to have Roy agree or not. Hadn't there been a hint of urgency in it?

"And then find out about the calves?" Pete said.

"If we can," Roy said. Roy was looking at the sky. He was looking all around, taking in the whole thing. "We might even try to get the cattle down alone, the two of us."

"Really?" Pete felt a surge of eagerness go through him.

"I may be wrong," Roy said, "but I seem to feel weather coming on. Be a good idea to get them down, if we can handle it." Roy put his hands around the pommel of his saddle, and pulled himself up. "Right now, though, we better see where those horses of yours have got to."

They were both up now, and moving out. Bullet ran on ahead of them, stopping every now and then to make sure they kept in sight. The horses went up out of the swale to the high ground, heading west and north. Being close to that side of the basin, it seemed a good idea to cover that part of it first. With the light the way it was, they could just about do it by the time the sun went down.

They rode at a walk, sometimes a slow canter, not saying anything, just looking out. The ridge gave out on a big piece of country, and they could see a long way off. Every now and then Pete would see a brown mark, with maybe a splash of white upon it. It was kind of reassuring to see the Herefords grazing quietly; and he wondered why he should have thought they wouldn't be.

When Bullet ran across in front of them, Pete's mind went back to Ben Tate and the Bluetick hound.

"What do you think that old hound of Ben's was raring all about back there, Roy?" Pete said, and when Roy didn't answer right away, Pete spoke again, thinking he maybe hadn't heard him the first time.

"I can't offhand say, for sure, Pete, and I don't like to guess."

"Does it have to do with that other thing you said you didn't want to guess about, until you could be sure? That you mentioned before we left the ranch?"

"The two might connect," Roy said. "It might explain Ben's hound."

Pete could hear the hound running through the brush, and see old Ben blaming it on Bullet being there.

"Why did he make off the Bluetick was acting up on account of Bullet?"

"That's another thing we don't know," Roy said. "Maybe Ben's trying to hide something. On the other hand, his old age might be making him kind of notionous."

"Pa always said Ben was kind of original at times. On account of living all alone so long. What do you think it is?"

"Well, in this case, I think he's trying to hide something, only we don't know what. Maybe we never will know."

They were quiet for a time again, riding along the high ground looking the country over. The rolling land rose up and fell away again, but they rode the rises and got a look at the biggest part of that corner of the basin. They were pretty close to the sheer rise of the cliffs when Bullet came upon a dark mass lying in the grass ahead, and barked. It was hard to tell about it at the distance. The evergreens and manzanita commenced at pretty near the same place, and some of the leafy foliage spread around it. It disappeared and re-appeared again a couple of times as the contour changed and they approached it.

"Ho!" Roy said in a minute. He made an exclamation of it, but he didn't shout. It was barely audible above the sound of the hoofs, but Pete knew he was surprised. "A cow down, or a steer. Looks dead from here."

They were now close enough for Pete to see the animal lying prone, and there was a look of total lifelessness about it, even with the mound of dirt heaped part way over it. Parts of the hide showed brown and white and stiffly motionless in the pallid grass and manzanita branches bending green around it.

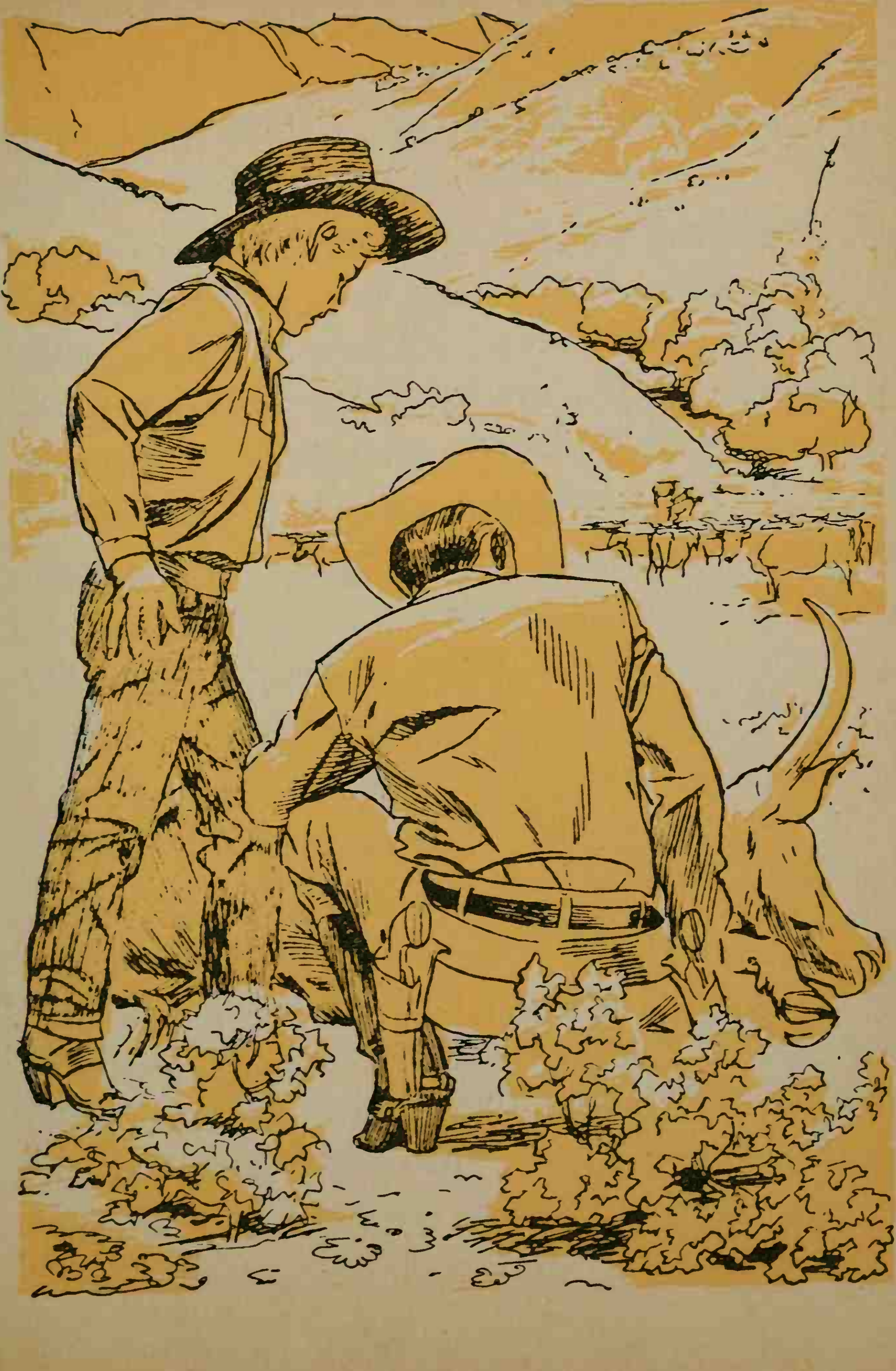
They were still more than fifty yards away, and it was not too clear, but Bullet was digging some of the heaped earth away, and Pete knew there was no question about its being dead. There was something so completely final about a creature that was finished that a person could nearly always tell, no matter what the distance was.

They saw where the wind was, and kept it at their backs. The animal lay on its side with the head clear of the dirt, the jaw flat on the ground and the horns curving up to either side. The angle between the head and the rest of it made it look as though the neck was broken. What they could see of the hide was badly torn, and the ribs sticking through the earth made clear white marks. It was hard to tell how long it might have been there, but something had been feeding on it off and on.

When they came to it they swung down and held their bridles on their arms. Pete stared at the ruins of the steer in the grass before them, and tried to think what might have done it. He remembered the talk of coyotes, or maybe lions, coming to the basin early on account of winter up above. It was plain no coyote could have done this, and he didn't think a lion could have, either. The steer had a crushed and battered look that didn't tally up with lions.

"Well," Roy said softly, and went to his knees at the creature's head. Much of the hide was ripped away, and the smashed and broken jawbones splintered through.

Pete didn't like the way that Roy had said it. It was as though he was so amazed at the destruction he thought only something sinister and awful could have done it. He



was aware of letting his mind drift out to Rusty and his ma.

"Is it lions, Roy?" Pete said. He had decided on his own it wasn't, but he would rather it was lions than something they didn't know anything about.

"I don't think so, Pete," Roy said. "A lion will cover up its kills, but with leaves and twigs and such, mostly. It could have used dirt here, but I don't think a lion did it."

"And it wouldn't be coyotes, either, would it?" Pete said. He felt the hair tugging at his neck as he speculated on the nature of the killer. In this wild, mysterious country almost anything could happen.

"Coyotes have likely been here, feeding off and on," Roy said, "but it wasn't coyotes dragged it down. It was something bigger—and a whole lot stronger."

Roy stood up and put his hands on his hips and looked around, as though the country might provide a clue.

"Something big and strong," he said again. "Like a bear."

"A bear?" Pete didn't know what to think at first. He had never known a black to try to jump a full-grown steer. Maybe they would pull a calf down now and then, if the chance was there and they had the mood, but they mostly fed on roots and berries, grubs and insects, and the like.

Arizona didn't even class a black bear as a predator.

"I don't think a black would do this," he said to Roy. Pete was sure of it.

"Maybe not," Roy said, "but once a long time ago I heard about a strange thing." Roy looked at Pete in a way that said he was being careful how he put this. Then he set his feet apart and put his arms out as though he was getting set to wrestle someone.

"I heard about a bear that one time came upon a cow and it stood like this on its hind legs, and then swung its forearms at the cow's head until the skull was crushed."

Roy paused and looked at Pete again. It was as if he wanted to make sure Pete was with him, still.

"The bear was not a black," Roy said. "It was a grizzly."

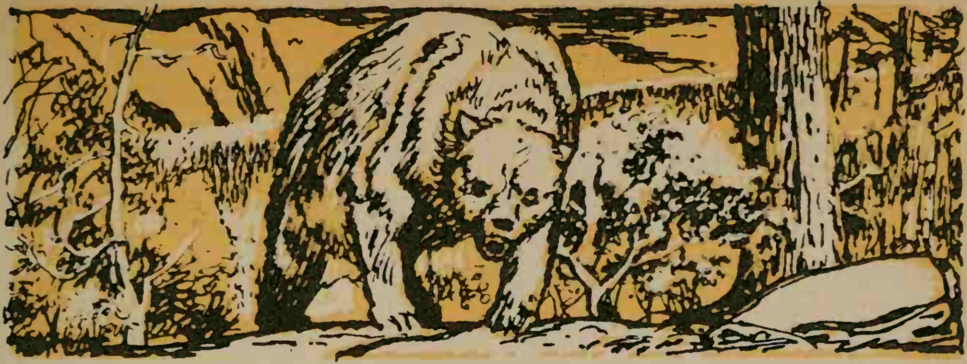
"A grizzly?" Pete felt the hair tugging at his neck again. "But there aren't any left in Arizona, Roy. Pa said the last was shot out years ago."

Roy shrugged and didn't say anything right away.

"Could be," he said when he had thought awhile. "Maybe this one comes from somewhere else—from in the north, maybe Colorado. Maybe he's old and mad and has to wander to find sufficient food. Perhaps he's come to spend the winter here."

Pete looked at Roy and didn't speak. The corner of his eye caught the curving ribs of the fallen steer arching white into the red sky, turning now with sundown. He felt the presence of something evil in the basin country.

All at once, he was scared to death for Rusty. Molly could not do much about a grizzly bear.



CHAPTER 7 • Wild Country

Pete was plenty tired, but it didn't seem to him he did much sleeping. Usually, the chill of those fall and autumn nights made a person cork right off, but every time he closed his eyes he would see the torn and battered steer again, and his mind would go along from there and imagine how it happened. Sometimes there would be a calf or two mixed up in it. But sooner or later Rusty would take the place of all the others.

He would see this grizzly standing there and slamming the colt around.

That's when he would open his eyes again and watch the stars above.

He kept listening, too. Nighttime in a strange place was always full of sounds a person had to get accustomed to. He had to get them sorted out and identified before he could relax and forget about them.

A tree branch scratching on another might mean one thing in one place, but something altogether different somewhere else. A horse being restless and snorty way up here could have some other reason for the same behavior at the home spread. The wind moving through the grass in a certain way was always interesting. An animal might cry out far, far away, and a person always wondered.

He had to figure out all that before his mind could let go of it.

Pete wished he could be like Roy, or even Bullet. They had both lain down and closed their eyes, and that was that. It must be all the other times they had slept beneath the stars that made it easy now. It didn't matter to them that a ravenous grizzly bear was skulking through the country, perhaps very near.

But maybe he did sleep some, at that. There seemed to be a gap in the night somewhere that he didn't remember anything about. It seemed the last clear thought he had was of the nearness of the stars.

And then there was some time skipped over, and when he looked again the sky was dark gray and empty overhead, and a slow flush of color was across the east.

They all rolled out about the same time. It was just that part of the day when the hour was the coldest, and it didn't help Pete's shivering any to crouch along the creek bank and wash his face and hands in the rush of freezing water. He was plenty glad he didn't have to take a bath in it just then.

When he returned to the bedrolls Roy had already fanned the embers of the night fire into life. Pete felt good with the warmth soaking into him, and he set his boots before the fire to make sure he could take some of that heat away with him.

By the time he had them on, Roy had got the bacon started, and the coffee pot was bumbling to itself. Bullet was making the rounds about the grove, investigating everything, and seeing how the horses were; but the smell of cooking pulled him back as if it were a rope around his neck.

They ate quickly and quietly, then rolled the cooking gear into the tow sack and stuffed it underneath the bedrolls. They had planned to tour the basin and return to camp when they were finished before deciding on another course. Without Alex they could travel light, and faster, too, if the need arose. A little jerky and a canteen of water would do for food if they were out long.

They didn't load themselves down with anything else, except that Roy took his rifle scabbard from the pack and strapped it to his saddle. Pete was glad he was bringing the lever gun along. A .30-.30 wasn't much for grizzly, but it was a whole lot better than throwing rocks.

"That about does it," Roy said when he was satisfied that everything was ready. Pete had brought the horses off the picket lines, and watered them and put their saddles on. It pleased him that Roy should think he had done a good job getting Trigger rigged.

"Do you think we ought to try and trail that bear from the steer?" Pete asked as he looked around. It was clear dawn now and the light was sharp and clear. "I don't see how there could be any sign, do you?"

"No, it's too old for us," Roy said. "Been a while since he's been there. Even Bullet didn't nose out anything important yesterday."

"Be best to scout the basin, then, like we planned," Pete said. "And hope to turn up Rusty and his ma."

"Best for now," Roy said. "Ought to tell pretty well by noon if they're in the basin or not. If not, we'll have to make the side canyons."

Pete didn't say anything right away. He was thinking of the side canyons, deep in mystery and legend, of the Indian ruins in the cliffs, empty for a thousand years; of the bull elk bugling in the night, and the strange wind soughing through the fractured rock.

"I'm sure worried, Roy. I guess if anything happens to either one of them I'll never forgive myself."

Roy laughed, and Pete wondered if it wasn't a put-on thing. "Oh, they're likely all right. That bear'd think twice before he took after them, even if he is a grizzly. He might catch one, or both, but he'd really have to earn that meat. Likely run off fifty pounds in the chase."

"I don't know," Pete said, and he was filled with doubt and apprehension. "We haven't even seen a glimpse of them. Maybe he's already done for them." Pete took a side look at Roy in the pause. "Is this grizzly the idea you had when we left the ranch?"

"It was just a notion," Roy said. "A possibility, is all. Something scared Juan's horse, and it could have been a bear."

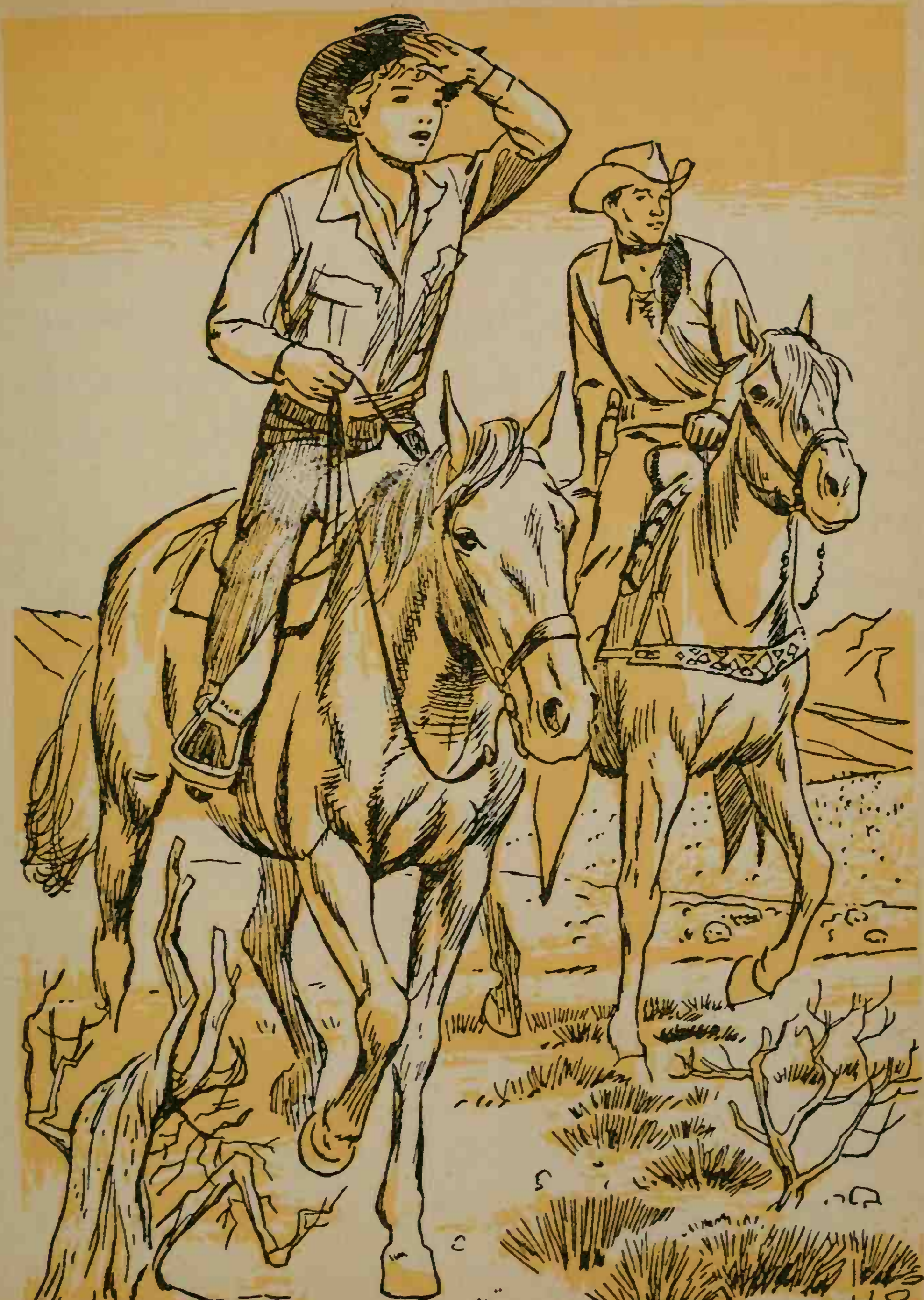
They were riding out, and already Pete was halfway standing in the stirrups, looking off. The fact that they hadn't seen the horses first thing in the morning made everything look more and more serious.

"They may just be acting shy," Roy said as he noticed Pete's anxiety. "It's pretty early to get an idea, one way or the other. This turn around the basin may tell us something." Roy tugged at his hat as though that made what he said more definite.

They rode quietly for a while. They had it figured out to ride an imaginary circle, with one of the larger pinnacles in the basin as the center, in such a way as to give them a decent look to either side. If they stuck to high ground they could see a lot of country without having to cover every inch of it. As they would have to do that, anyway, if they took the cattle down, they didn't want to have to do it twice.

The sun was coming brightly on a long slant from the east, and the cliffs rose bold and richly painted where the light struck full upon them. Deep shadows lay along their bases in the east, and flowed along in black lakes beneath the clumps of trees standing here and there. Every now and then they would see a handful of cattle grazing quietly far away, and occasionally there would be a calf or two among them, too.

But some were missing, that was sure.



The dark mystery underneath the groves of trees made him think of his pa tracking through the timber up on Mingus Mountain to the south. He felt just a little bit remiss when he realized he hadn't paid much mind to him of late. He wondered if they had their man by now, or if they were still behind him. Come noon, it would be two days since Pa took the trail, and like as not he would have something to show for all that time by now.

They came to a high rise giving out on a pretty big spread of country, and reined up for a moment to let the horses blow, and look around. Pete could see a good deal of stock scattered over the rolling land, but there weren't any horses that he could tell.

"We ought to have field glasses," he said to Roy. "They'd be a big help here."

"They sure would," Roy said. "They'd be mighty handy at a time like this."

Roy was easing in his saddle, one knee raised and resting on the pommel, and his hand back, to lean on Trigger's hindquarters. Off a ways, Bullet sat on his haunches and let his tongue hang out.

"Roy, what if we don't find Rusty in the basin?" Pete said. "Then it means the side canyons, doesn't it?" A kind of feeling had come over him. They hadn't covered but a quarter of the basin in their search, but he was pretty near dead certain neither Rusty nor his ma was there.

"That's right, Pete," Roy said. Roy's face had a look of deep thought before he spoke again. "It looks to me as if there's some kind of pattern to this whole thing. It just now became clear to me, sitting here and thinking over what we know."

"How's that?" Pete asked. He wished he could see some kind of pattern in it.

Roy let his arm pass an arc across the western cliffs and downward toward the entrance to the main canyon leading south.

"Over there toward the cliffs is where we found the steer. Down south of it, just above the point where the canyon opens, is where Juan got into trouble. And further south, still, Ben Tate's hound is yowling through the brush. If all that means bear sign, it kind of locates the critter on that side."

Pete thought about it for a moment. It could have been bear smell, sure enough, that spooked Juan's horse. Bear smell would do it as quick as any snake.

"You think Ben's dog got a whiff of it, too?" Pete asked.

"Could have, sure enough," Roy said. "More likely, got a look at him one time, too, and has been rattled ever since. That'd explain why Bullet didn't act up in the same piece of country. Bullet neither saw nor smelled it, so didn't know about it. But the hound had, and he remembered."

"How come Ben Tate hasn't figured that out?" Pete asked.

Roy didn't answer that right away, and when he did he took his time. "I don't know," he started in. "Maybe he has. Maybe he does know, but has his own reasons for not letting on about it."

Pete wondered if they ought to go on back down to Ben's place and pin the old man down, but Roy shook his head when Pete asked about it.

"We can better spend our time right here. We don't know for sure the bear's been down there, but that steer is ample evidence he's been up here. Anyway, we know the horses got a good way past Ben's, and that's what we're really looking for."

"That's right," Pete said. "I pretty near got it mixed up." It was hard to keep it all straight, he was so anxious. He wished he could think it all out the way that Roy was doing. "I guess we better try the western side, then, don't you think?"

"Best to finish this first, then we'll have it over with. If the grizzly's over there, it doesn't necessarily mean the horses are."

"Golly, I'm sure glad of that," Pete said, and it came out of him so suddenly he laughed, and then Roy was all at once laughing with him. The good feeling of the laughter made some of the anxiety ease out of him, and he felt better than he had in quite a while.

They came off the rise and kept on riding this imaginary circle. Despite the moment of laughter, Pete had a feeling of urgency about it now. He wanted to get to the western side of the basin. It occurred to him that Molly might have come upon the bear someplace, maybe had a smell of it, or a look. He knew her well enough; she would seek the roughest piece of country she could find. Like as not, she would head into the deepest side canyon over there to get away.

And if she got into that canyon, maybe she would be trapped.

They kept it up till noon, then called it quits. There wasn't any part of the basin they hadn't looked at closely, or studied from a high point where the view was good. There didn't seem to be a chance that Molly and the colt were in there.

They returned to camp to put the gear together and loaded up on Alex. If they were going off into some deep side canyon they ought to have their pack along. Roy said there might come a time when they wished they had their bedrolls and some hot food. Some of those canyons went pretty near to the end of earth, and they could be gone awhile.

The weather had all at once seemed to take on a mood of change, and Pete recalled what Roy had said. The sun was bright and pleasant in the basin, still, but far away to the north and northwest there seemed to be a scud of cloud above the Rim. It didn't appear to be anything bad just yet, but it was fall, and there had been that touch of snow at Flagstaff.

Though they couldn't get a look at them on account of the Rim rising high, Pete imagined the San Francisco Peaks would be white and gleaming.

So there wasn't much sense in heading into really remote back country without being ready for anything that came along. If they got caught in some kind of freak storm they wouldn't do so well with just their saddle blankets to cover them.

It didn't take long to throw the gear on Alex and tie it down with the diamond hitch. It was a rare thing to see Roy do all that in less time than it took Pete to think about it. It just seemed that everything came off the ground at once and wound up in that pack saddle.

And while Pete was still marveling at that, the rope jumped into the air and there was a blur of it all mixed up with Roy's hands and arms, and then all at once he was dogging the end of it down, and standing back, getting his hat adjusted on his head.

There had been some talk about a bite to eat before they shoved off, but the look of the weather said they shouldn't take the time. Pete was already thinking of a hot meal, on account of the brisk wind suddenly blowing, but that same wind, and the clouds piling all along the Rim, could make it worse if they hung around.

And anyway, Roy said with a grin, there was plenty of jerky to be eaten cold as they rode along.

"We better take one more look at the steer," Roy said once they were mounted up and on the move. "We can't trail from there, but we may get a line on the right canyon to start to work on after another look."

"There seemed to be some openings in the cliffs near there," Pete said. Pete saw the dark scars in the palisades near the area where he knew the steer was lying. "Maybe he came out of one of them when he saw that meat so near."

"You just think like a grizzly, Pete, and you can find him anywhere," Roy said, and Pete saw the smile starting on his face.

"A person could do a lot worse, I'd think," he said. "Seems to me the best hunters try to figure what the game they're after will do in a certain situation, and they do the same. Pa was always pretty good at telling what a lion was going to do, or a bobcat, maybe, when he still ran the hounds."

"That's right, Pete," Roy said. "I wasn't laughing at you. The more a man knows about his quarry, the more he's likely to bring him down."

"I don't guess we know too much about this bear, though," Pete said after thinking on it.

"No, Pete, a grizzly is a new one on me, too," Roy said. "I guess we'll just have to feel our way along."

They were heading toward the steer at the edge of the manzanita and the evergreens, and Pete gnawed on the

jerky. When they came up the rise beyond the grove of pine where they had camped he felt the wind hitting in big blasts of biting air, and he pulled his denim jacket about him tighter.

Dense clouds had now built up above the Rim and they were coming across the basin in ragged patches, as if the wind had torn them loose and flung them helter-skelter. Far away there seemed to be a mist drifting down beneath the solid pack of clouds above the cliffs, and Pete wondered if that was snow or only tatters of the clouds trailing down.

By the time they reached the steer the sun was gone.

Roy got down again and prowled around, and then resumed his saddle, and shook his head. Bullet took a couple of solid sniffs, and sat, too, as if it was a mystery to him, as well.

"Still doesn't tell us any more than yesterday," Roy said. "Kind of bolsters my pattern notion, though. He does seem to hanker for this side of the basin."

Pete looked at the steer in silence and thought of the violent death that had descended on it. Just as in the night, when he had thought about it, he could see Rusty in its place, or Molly.

He made himself pull his eyes away from it and look around. He filled his eyes with the palisades and rolling, dark-edged clouds to drive the sight away. Far away, yet the nearest to their position, the dark mouth of a canyon opened into the basin.

"I wonder about that one," he said after a moment. "It's about as close as any, and it's on this side."

"I was thinking about that one, too," Roy said. "I was up there with your pa one time. In a ways, it forks and becomes two canyons, one right, one left. A big piece of country back in there, and plenty rough."

"Two?" Pete said, and once again he was reminded of Roy's extensive knowledge of this place, when compared to his own. And he thought again how strange it was. He stared at the opening, at an angle to them, far away.

"That's right, but you can't see the split from here. The branch is maybe a quarter of a mile in, then they join again at the head, deep in."

Pete thought about it, and remembered something.

"Pa spoke about those one time," he said. "I think there's an old Indian ruin up there someplace."

"Just about at the head, where the two join up again," Roy said. "That's right. I've seen the ruins. Must have been rooms enough for a couple of hundred people at one time."

"Those must have been the *antiguos* Juan speaks about sometimes—the people, I mean," Pete said. "Maybe that's where he gets his ideas about his *brujas*."

"Maybe so," Roy said, and laughed as the horses began to move again. "It's wild enough country for witches, as I remember it."

They did not talk much, as they rode toward the canyon in the distance. Maybe it was because the grizzly was in their heads, Pete thought. He might be waiting in that canyon, and Molly and Rusty might be in there, too. It was the kind of secret, rugged place Molly would seek out, had she been frightened by the bear.

And, too, the wind was blowing very hard, and breathing was difficult enough without trying to keep up any sort of conversation.

They came into the mouth of the canyon in something like half an hour, and the walls on either side were high enough to make Pete's neck ache when he looked at them, and of sufficient savagery to make him shudder.

The snow coming onto the topmost crags was plain to see, and strange in the way it melted or disappeared in thin air before it reached the lower elevations. Now that they had left the unprotected basin, the wind had abated, and it was quiet where they were. It was a queer thing to be watching a snowy gale nearly three thousand feet above them.

In twenty minutes they came to the fork where the second canyon opened left, and they stopped. Roy looked carefully around.

“I guess it doesn’t make much difference which one we take. They both join up, anyway, and the distance is about the same either way.”

“Is it far to the head?” Pete asked.

“We’ll still have daylight to set our camp,” Roy said. “Riding easy, with our eyes peeled, it should take about three hours, maybe less.”

Pete looked at the shattered rock and the beckoning, yet repellent, mystery of the pair of fissures winding off. The bear might be in one of them, or neither, but so might Rusty and his ma.

“Maybe we ought to split here, and each take one.” He made it sound as decisive as he could. It had cost him something in courage to make his mind up.

Roy didn’t say anything right away, but he gave Pete a long, sizing-up kind of look. Pete got the idea he was being estimated.

"I don't know about that, Pete," Roy said when he had looked him over good. "There could be trouble in one of these things. I don't think your pa'd approve of any such thing."

But now that he had spoken about it, Pete was definite. "I guess I already did a whole lot Pa won't approve of. A little bit more won't make much difference."

"It could, Pete," Roy said. "This could get to be a big business."

"If it could for us, it could for Rusty, too," Pete said. "If he's in there I want to get to him 'fore dark. If we both take one side, it means we've got to save the other for tomorrow. A lot could happen in a night."

Roy rubbed the side of his jaw and frowned up at the ragged Rim. "That's true, a lot could, all right."

"The time saved by splitting up could maybe mean the saving of Rusty's life."

"I know," Roy said. "I don't like the idea of leaving you alone, though."

"Well, Rusty's my colt, isn't he?" Pete said. "I got him into this, and I've got to get him out of it. I'd sure never forgive myself if something happened while I was taking it easy around a campfire in the night."

This time Roy smiled and kind of snorted, and then he reached over and undid the straps that held his rifle scabbard to the saddle.

"I don't know why I'm giving in like this," he said as he handed it to Pete. "I guess it's the same as getting caught up in this scheme of yours in the first place. Maybe I admire your spunk and determination; on the other hand, maybe I'm just curious to see what will happen next. You keep on like this and you're likely to become a real buckaroo some day. If you live that long."

Roy was smiling in a close-mouthed kind of way, and Pete didn't know just what to say. He felt a kind of glow spread through him that Roy should think he might have possibilities. He kept busy with the scabbard straps until he had it hitched right.

"I just want my colt, is all," he said.

That seemed to settle it, and Roy looked around again. He seemed to be adding everything up before they got started once again.

"Well, I don't guess I've got the right to keep a man from his horse, no matter what I think," he said. "Tell you what, I'll take Alex along with me, and go on up here to the left. I'll take Bullet, too—he's got a nose for trouble. That'll offset Alex being slow and in the way if something should develop. You and Buck can move around pretty freely, and should you need help, you've got the rifle."

"I guess that's all right," Pete said. "Do we meet at the Indian ruin, then?"

"A good enough place," Roy said. "First one there can look for a good place to camp. Keep your eyes and ears open, now, hear?"

"I sure enough will, Roy," Pete said.

"And don't go begging trouble." It was plain to Pete that Roy didn't like this any too well, but he was going along with it.

"I won't," Pete said. "I'll be careful." Then he thought of something Juan would sometimes say, when he was in a mood for using ceremony. *"Vaya con Dios,"* he said to Roy.

"Gracias, compadre," Roy said, and he made a small formal bow to Pete, and smiled. "May the *Madre* guide and keep you."

"Gracias, senor," Pete said. *"Adios."*

"Adios, little Pedro," Roy said.

Pete turned Buck away first, and went for a hundred yards up the right-hand canyon before he turned his head.

Then he looked and saw Roy wave his hat at him. When Roy put it on again, Trigger began to move, and Alex followed on the hackamore. Bullet trailed along, his tail moving from side to side. In another moment they had disappeared, and Pete and Buck were all alone.

CHAPTER 8 • All Alone

Pete got to thinking after a while that this side canyon was a lonesome kind of place to be. He wasn't ashamed to admit that to himself, or that he was a little bit leary about the look of it. Maybe if he hadn't been thinking about the grizzly bear, he could have taken real pleasure in the ride; he had surely longed to come into this country for a while.

But getting it in such a big dose all at once was something else again. It wasn't only thinking of what a creature of that sort might do to Rusty, or to Molly, if he somehow cornered them.

If it was in this place, Pete wondered if it might not take a crack at him.

He asked himself if it was because he was so young that he thought that way. Folks were always saying there was nothing like a young one—a colt—to have imagination, or to get skittish about a thing. Shucks, a grizzly would as soon take off and run as look at a human being, as most everybody knew.

Still, that side canyon was the kind of place to make a person's mind make flights of fancy. If he let it get away from him, his mind could see anything it wanted to in those rocks and crags.

He rode along and kept his imagination under hand as best he could. If he started thinking that bear was giving him the eye from some secret fastness in the rocks, or even tracking him through the litter of brush and fallen stone, he would have himself in a stew of worry.

It was already plenty bad to think the bear might have got to Rusty.

He made his mind up that this was an interesting piece of country, well worth looking over. He had wanted to explore these side canyons for as long as he could remember, and here he was at last. He told himself he had better take advantage of the opportunity and try to enjoy himself a little.

Look at those cliffs go rising up, he told himself, as though to make a conversation of it. See how that dust of snow lies on the red rocks up on top. Looks just like strawberry shortcake with whipped cream all over it.

And the trees up there, all powdered over, too. And see the way they move and lean, even at the distance. There must be a gale coming right off the San Francisco Peaks. He sure was lucky to be in here where he could look at all these marvels.

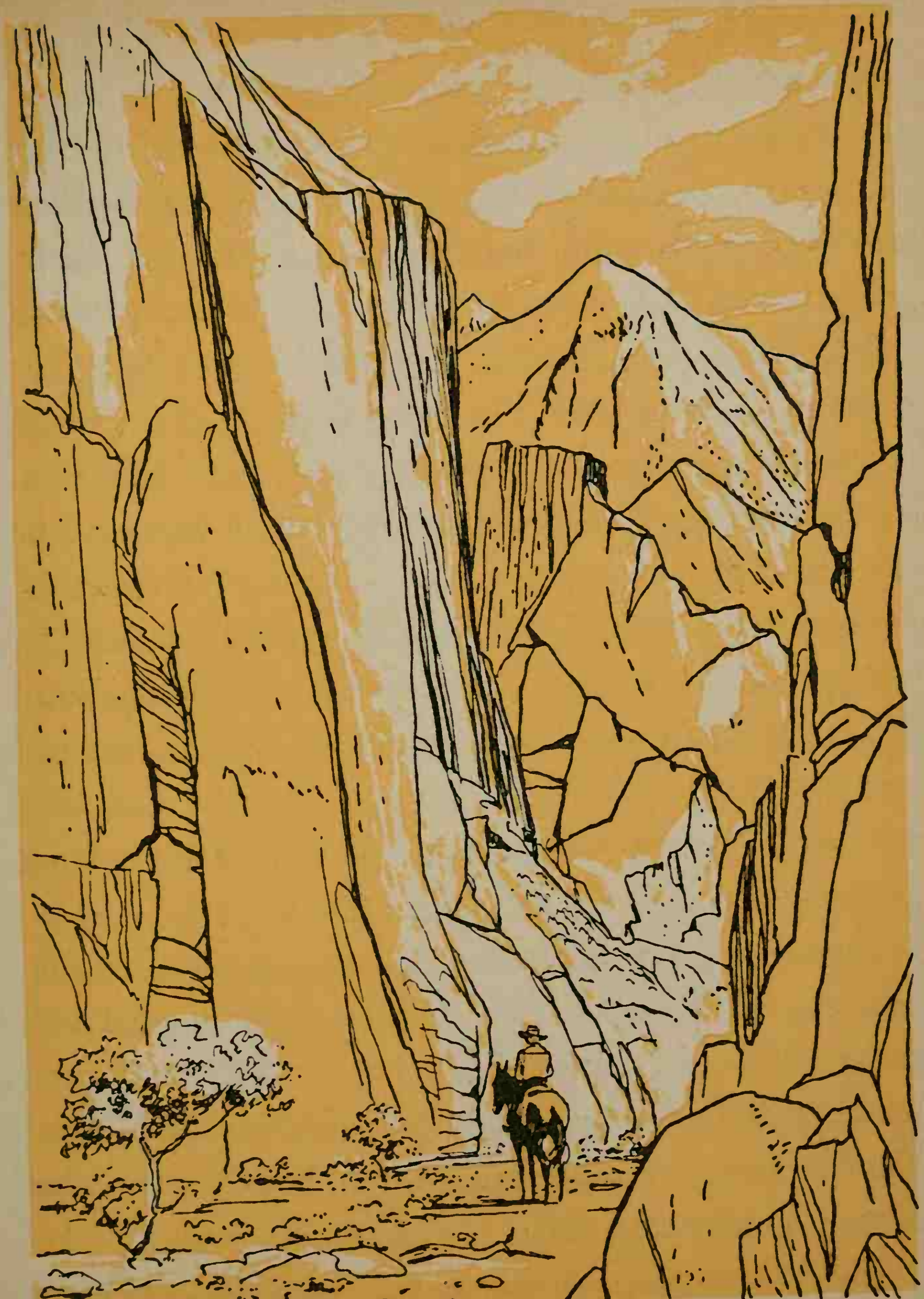
Likely, a grizzly bear would take a fancy to them, too.

He got a grip on his thoughts and dragged them from the bear again. He had figured he had them where he wanted them, but they had gone sneaking off when he least expected it. Just when he had relaxed a little.

Maybe he could do it better if he talked to Buck instead of making foolish chatter with himself. No doubt, Buck had rambled through this place before, when he had been grazing in the basin, and maybe he would enjoy a word or two about it.

Now that the thought had come to him, he thought again how queer it was that every living creature connected with the ranch had been through these canyons but himself. Even the stock had likely grazed up this way off and on. It made him feel more like a kid than ever. Everybody knew what it was like in here, but him.

"Buck," he said to the bay horse, "I suppose you know



your way around in here pretty well, don't you? I expect you know where the grass is sweetest, and where the best pools are when the runoff is coming down. I'll bet you even know where Molly likes to hang out when she comes up this way."

If Buck knew any of these things he wasn't owning up to it. He was a wise old animal, but he didn't have a word to say. He just kept going on along the rough cattle trail making bubbling, grunting noises deep inside himself, the way Alex sometimes did.

Wise or not, Pete thought, there were some things Buck wouldn't know too much about. As long as they were killing time with this game, he figured they might as well get on with it.

"I suppose you've even seen the Indian ruins Roy was speaking of," he said. "We ought to catch a sight of them before too long. I don't mean to show myself up as smarter than you, but I'll bet you don't know a ruin from a hole in the cliff."

Pete looked around for a moment to see how the country lay. They were still some distance from the meeting place, but they were getting there. It seemed to be getting colder as the afternoon wore on, and the snow coming down from far above didn't melt at such a distance overhead as it had before. When he moved his head again, his heart lurched at the obscure but heavy movement in a clump of piñon up ahead; then it calmed again as the Hereford cow put her head around the branches and watched him warily.

Pete put his mind back on the subject of the conversation.

"These old ones, these *antiguos,* came along the Verde and into these canyons over a thousand years ago. They built themselves big buildings in the cliffs—pueblos— inside of caves when they could find them. They grew squash and corn, and even cotton out of which they made certain kinds of clothing. They were pretty good at pottery, and grinding tools and arrowheads out of stone. Sometimes at night they'd build their ceremonial fires and dance around them making big medicine while the drums throbbed."

Pete looked around again, but the canyon was the same, going up in sheets and planes and monstrous fractures. Explaining the ways of the old ones out loud to Buck had pretty near made them come to life again out of a thousand years of history. It surprised him he could remember so much of what his pa and other folks had said from time to time.

It wouldn't take such a stretch of the imagination to see a bunch of them come trotting around the bend, bronze and stocky in their breechcloths and their yucca fiber sandals, with their arrows notched to their bowstrings at the ready.

He wondered what kind of hunting luck they had with them. There must have been game aplenty in the old days, before the *antiguos* moved away.

In a little while he came around a bend himself, and these thoughts that were running through his mind took on a sudden, queer reality. The canyon became wider all at once, and the wall to the left developed a deep and lengthy seam.

Wind and rain and frost for a hundred million years had slowly worked an alcove into solid rock, but Pete was not so much aware of the natural marvel as he was of the great facade of stone and adobe with the doors and windows looking out.

So well did the alcove shield the pueblo against the slow but endless erosion of the weather, that Pete could not get over the notion that the inhabitants would appear at any moment to ask what he was doing there.

It didn't make any difference that he knew for certain that the last of the *antiguos* had gone away long before the sailing of Columbus.

Pete came up to it slowly, watching warily. There was nothing to be afraid of, he kept saying to himself. There was no one here to hurt him or to give him trouble. Likely, the only living thing these walls had housed in all the passing centuries since they had been deserted was a pack rat off and on.

And maybe a family of rock wrens now and then.

Just the same, he wasn't in any hurry. He kept coming in this watchful manner, looking all around. He wondered if there was anything disrespectful in his desire to see what the inside of that place might look like. If Juan was here, he would likely call the wailing wind the voices of the old ones' unseen *espiritus* watching over their old abiding place. It was just the kind of place in which Juan would find a whole corral full of his *brujas*.

Pete found he could get a laugh from the thought of that; nevertheless, he didn't relax his attitude of watchfulness.

Pretty soon he came to the base of the cliff, and he had to dismount if he was going up. There was a faint ledge to the left that writhed and hitched to the pueblo in the alcove standing maybe fifty to seventy feet above the canyon floor. Pete was undecided for a moment, but he had got here first, and there was time.

And, anyway, he had always wanted to see the ruins.

It made him feel a little foolish to take the rifle with him, but he might as well be on the safe side. It was a good thing it had a sling, otherwise it might get in the way in climbing up. Even so, he would have taken it; a fellow never knew about such places.

It wasn't bad once he got his feet started right on the narrow ledge. He took it slow on account of grained dust and loose rock having drifted onto it from up above. Every now and then he would have to get around a piece of scrub growth clinging to the rock, and once a slide of loose stone underfoot caused him to press against the wall with the sweat breaking out upon his back.

He stared down and watched the spilling talus hit the canyon floor below. He was well over halfway up by now, and it looked like a long way down. A man wouldn't need to have a horse falling on him here to break a leg.

After that the rest went easy. The ledge broadened out a foot or two, and the added space allowed a better choice as to where to put his feet. High-heeled boots surely weren't the best of climbing gear, but it was better now. As long as he didn't get his spur rowels tangled, or hooked up in his Levis, he ought to be all right; he should have taken the spurs off, come to think of it. But he would have to stop this looking down so much. The look of the distant floor did strange things to his sense of balance.

Then he came to the overreaching lip above, and grasped it with his two hands, putting his weight upon it to test its strength. Carefully he pulled himself up, and then lay flat when he was on top. There was a kind of broad terrace that he was lying on, with the front of the great pueblo standing back ten or fifteen feet from the edge. He hadn't noticed the indentation from down below, but he was grateful for it now, as a place to lie on and catch his breath.

When he got to his knees and then his feet, he pulled his clothes together and looked around. The pueblo looked to be about two stories high—two full ones, and two or three separate rooms making parts of a third. Each level was set back from the one below it, and there didn't seem to be any stairways going up. When he saw the dry, peeled saplings lying here and there about the terrace he thought they might have served as ladders at one time.

The *antiguos* had planned this place to be a fortress against marauding nomads.

He had his choice of rooms to look at, and as there didn't seem to be much difference, he took the nearest. He was kind of careful when he entered and he realized he had gotten the rifle unslung, and was holding it where it would do the most good if it was needed.

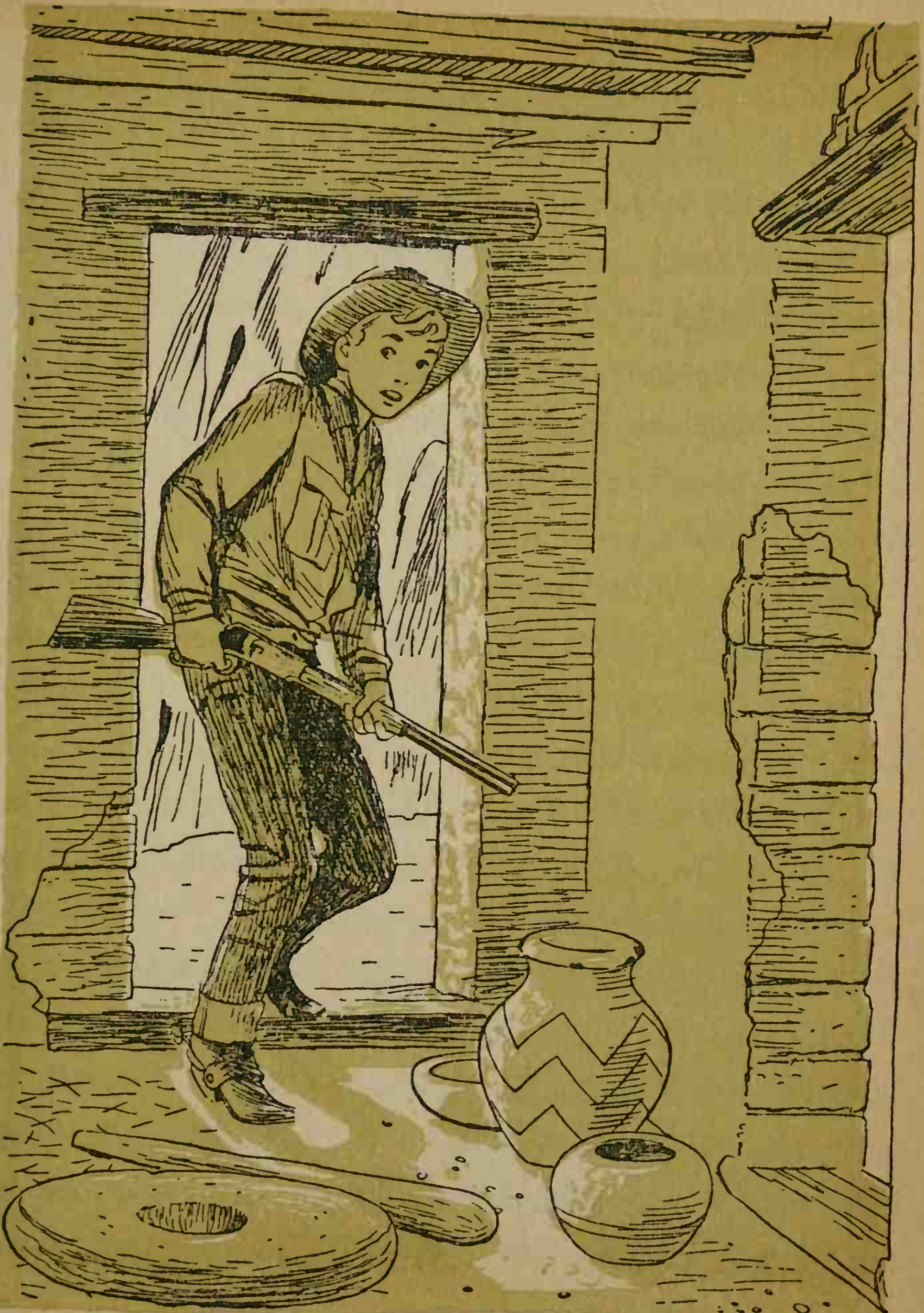
He had expected to see a well of darkness ahead of him, and it surprised him to find the room well-lighted by a second door which opened on another outside passage. He hadn't realized before that this was a corner room.

Despite the fact that the room contained no danger for him, he was aware of a creepy feeling when he stepped inside and looked around. The notion came to him that the old ones who had lived in this place so very long ago might return again at almost any moment, for the floor was strewn with abandoned implements, jars and bowls of pottery, and odds and ends of clothing.

There were even six or a dozen small ears of corn lying heaped together near the fire pit in the center of the floor.

The move to leave had been made in a hurry, the thought occurred to him, and they must have traveled light.

When he was sure of the light, and his eyes were



accustomed to the shadows, he began to look more closely at what the *antiguos* had left behind them.

The pottery was mostly gray, and the black smudges on the bottoms and the sides of the various pieces said plainly it was cooking ware. A few reddish pieces were larger than the gray and might have seen use as storage jars or water bottles. There was a pair of beautiful white ones whose intricate black designs and polished red interiors proclaimed them as something special, likely ceremonial vessels.

Some of the stone axes and hoes were badly chipped or broken and had been left as useless. The large *metates* where the corn was ground had been too heavy to remove. And as the *manos* were of no use without the grinding surface, they had been left as well. The severed thong explained the presence of a solitary yucca sandal; a large rent had nearly ripped a sleeping mat in two.

They had taken what they needed and had left the rest.

Pete wondered if he wouldn't like to take a few of these things back with him, then decided not to. Although he knew that other ranchers in the country did such things from time to time, there seemed to be something indecent in the act. It would be best just to leave things as they were.

When he stood up again he heard the strange wailing of the wind, but when his back turned cold around the shoulders he knew it wasn't the wind at all. He stood rooted to the floor with not a breath moving through him as it stopped, and then began again.

He thought of Juan's *brujas,* and was suddenly very much afraid.

Then he pulled himself together and gripped the rifle. Of course it was the wind, he told himself; it was simply swirling in a new place, or at a different angle than before. He told himself this several times as he moved toward the doorway to the terrace and stepped into the open to see if he could locate the point of origin.

At first he saw nothing except the horse. But the way that Buck was standing, with his ears pointed forward and his back leaning into the picket rope, made Pete look beyond him and that time he saw the figure standing some ways off looking up at him. The man was wrapped in a blanket and seemed to be gnarled and bent with age. His face was dark and his black hair was bound and wrapped at the back of his neck with cord.

Pete felt a shiver tickle his scalp. He didn't believe in ghosts—not him—but what was an Indian doing here, at the lonely, long-deserted pueblo?

Pete didn't know exactly what to do. At first he half believed that one of the *antiguos* really had returned from out of a thousand yesterdays, and he wondered what Juan might have to say. Would Juan twirl his long mustachios and make his little jokes, or would he stare bug-eyed and call upon the saints for his protection?

Then he thought of Roy again, and knew that Roy would not put stock in any such conclusion. Roy would know him for what he most certainly must be, simply an old man standing with his blanket wrapped around him against the cold, trying to call to him.

The new thought helped Pete get a grip on himself, and he moved to the edge of the terrace and put his hand to his ear to signify attention. He watched the old Indian cup his hands about his mouth and the strange cry came again, more clearly, but still indistinct.

Pete cupped his hands to his own mouth, and called, "What?" which seemed a silly thing to say, but he could think of nothing else. But it appeared to help, because the next time the old man cried out, Pete thought he picked a word out of the keening sound.

The cry came again, and that time Pete heard the word clearly, and he remembered the meaning of it. *"Chindi"* was a Navajo term which labeled an event, an activity, or a place as being forbidden, and it all at once came to him that the old Indian down there didn't like the idea of his being up the cliffside in the house of the *antiguos.*

He didn't much care about the old man's superstitions, but he was ready to come down anyway, and he didn't try to argue with him—a hard thing to do even had he chosen to try. From the one word he understood the man to be a Navajo, but that was all he got.

It wouldn't make sense to stand up there shouting back and forth, neither getting the sense of what the other said.

Since he had traveled the ledge once, it was quicker going down. He knew where the soft spots were and he avoided them. The old man stood hunched in his blanket, watching him descend. He wasn't yelling any more, and Pete had the notion he was satisfied that he had put across the meaning of his message.

When Pete hit solid ground again and walked toward the old man, it came over him that he was a good deal more ancient than he had appeared from up above. His body was hunched inside the many folds of the shapeless red blanket, but his legs and hands had the look of old roots long buried underground. His face was a maze of lines and wrinkles, and only his eyes seemed bright and lively. His hair was bluish-black, but iron-gray deep in, and bound with a tight cord at the back of his neck.

Pete wondered what he was doing so far from the reservation.

Now that he was down below, before him, the old man was trying to talk to him again, but without the wailing sound this time. The voice came out of his chest in gutturals and rumbles and his hands moved here and there and gestured at the ruins in the cliff from time to time. The word *"chindi"* was repeated once again, and Pete got the idea the Navajo was going over the whole thing once more.

Pete didn't know any Navajo talk, although he had heard it spoken now and then in Flagstaff, and once or twice when he had visited the trading posts on the reservation with his pa. He didn't think he owed the old man an explanation anyway, but he would rather be friendly with him than the other way around. It had just occurred to him that the Indian might know about Rusty or the grizzly bear.

"I was looking for a camping place," Pete said, and hoped he got the sense of it across. He said it slowly and watched the seamed and leathery face for a reaction.

When there wasn't any, but only quiet contemplation, he pointed at the ruin, and then placed his palms together and laid his head against them with his eyes closed.

This time the old man understood, his face opened with alarm, and he cried, *"Chindi! Chindi!"* several times.

Pete didn't know whether he felt any better yet or not. He had explained his presence, but the Navajo was now more excited than before. It was going to be hard enough making him understand about the horses and the bear without having him all riled up on top of it.

Pete tried his special kind of sign language again, this time to get the Indian calmed down. Once more he pointed at the ruin, placed his head against his pressed palms, and closed his eyes; then before the old man could react, he raised his head and shook it violently from side to side.

The old man stared for a moment, then his face moved in a broad and toothless smile.

"Ya-ta-heh!" he said.

"Ya-ta-heh!" Pete said. He didn't know what it meant, but it must be good.

"Ya-ta-heh!" the old man said again.

"Ya-ta-heh!" Pete said.

When the old man folded his arms and looked stolidly at Pete again, Pete knew that something more was expected of him.

Pete looked around while he tried to think of how to go about the thing he wished to say. It was getting pretty late, with dark not far away, and he wished that Roy would come. Roy would know how to get beyond *"chindi"* and *"ya-ta-heh."*

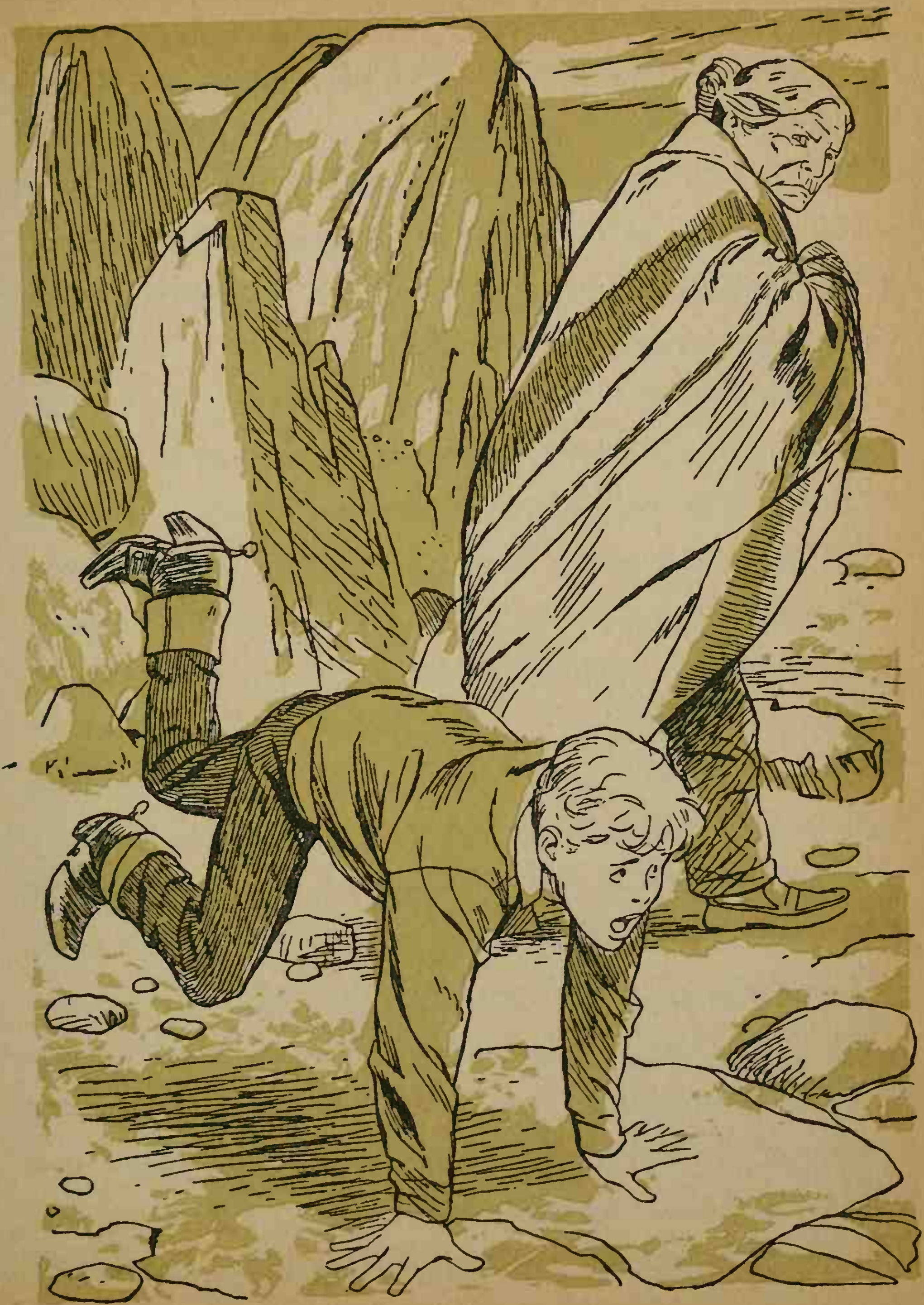
After a moment he had an idea, and he got down on all fours and pranced around. When he looked up to see how he was doing, the old man's expression showed astonishment.

As that hadn't seemed to work, Pete then dropped his head down, as though to graze, and when he raised it up again he whinnied. This time the Navajo backed away a pace or two.

"Ya-ta-heh!" Pete said, aware that things were going wrong, and hoping to restore the *status quo*. But there was no pleasing smile from the old man this time.

Pete changed over to the bear. He had to make this man see what he was driving at, somehow. With every minute counting, there was a chance he would be a real help if he could only understand.

Pete went at this one real carefully. He tried to remember



the tales he had heard of how a bear walked, the rolling motion of the shoulders, and the hitching of the rump and hind legs. He snarled and snapped his teeth, and even roared a time or two. He was so intent on doing this thing right that the Navajo was moving off in genuine alarm before Pete became aware of it.

Then he saw the dark red blanket flapping out behind, looking like a butterfly or an exotic bird going up the canyon, and he jumped to his feet and began to run. He heard the echoes of his shouting coming down from the high walls, but the old man heard them, too, and just ran faster. It was an amazing thing to see how fear inspired his pace.

Pete was gaining some, but the old man had a good start, and he was moving fast. Pete's boots were hardly made for foot-racing through a rock-strewn canyon, and it would be a time before he caught him. He didn't want to leave Buck staked out alone for any length of time, but on the other hand, if he quit the chase he might never see the Navajo again.

About that time the old man commenced to go around the slow bend leading into the other branch. One second he was a blur of dark red with legs and arms moving in and out, and the next he had pulled himself to a flapping halt, and was standing, indecisively, staring at something up ahead.

And in still another, Pete heard the sound of Bullet barking.

CHAPTER 9 • "A Pretty Good Show!"

Pete couldn't offhand think when he had been so glad to see a man. The old Indian was the kind of problem he didn't know how to cope with. Even had he caught him, he likely wouldn't have gotten very far with him alone. It was clear to Pete by now that the Navajo didn't want anything to do with him. In the old man's eyes Pete knew he was *"chindi,"* as *"chindi"* as the ruins.

And as the Indian might be able to help, Pete knew they had to talk to him.

But there was Roy, now, with Bullet and Trigger and the packhorse, and everything had changed again. Pete saw the old man standing without decision, still, as Roy approached him. Pete wasn't near enough yet to hear anything that passed between them, but he could see Roy's hand raised in a greeting, and the talk coming out of him appeared to make the Navajo relax.

Pete couldn't remember that Roy had ever said anything about knowing Navvy talk, but the idea of it didn't surprise him any.

Pete came up to them still puffing and blowing and trying to catch his breath. It seemed to him the old man ought to be pretty well exhausted from the run, but he was standing all wrapped up in his blanket again, and hardly a breath appeared to be coming out of him. If he had the look of old roots, he must have had their toughness, too.

His eyes were wary, though, and Pete knew the old man wasn't sure about him yet.

"Golly, I'm glad to see you, Roy," Pete said all in a rush of air. "I guess I wasn't getting anywhere with this old Indian fellow. We don't understand the same kind of talk."

It looked to Pete as though Roy might be having himself a laugh, but he couldn't tell for sure. Roy's face had the look of suppressed amusement, it seemed to him.

"No, I kind of gathered you weren't getting much of anywhere with him," Roy said to Pete. "And after exchanging views with him just now, I'm sure of it."

"Well, it surely isn't for lack of trying," Pete said, and then he put that out of his mind for a moment and asked about the horses.

"Didn't see anything," Roy said. "I don't know that that means anything one way or the other. Bullet got a sniff of something, though."

"He did?" Pete said. "Was it the bear?"

"I don't know. Could have been. He went up into the rocks a ways, but then he lost it, I guess."

Pete looked down the branch canyon from which Roy had come, and wondered. "I don't know. I didn't see anything either. Maybe we'd better head on and try another."

"Best to camp till morning," Roy said. "We can't see anything now; getting late. Besides, if we get on the right side of the old gent, here, he may lend a hand."

Pete looked at the old man again. "I got as far as understanding that he didn't take to anybody sleeping in that old ruin over there, but after that we lost track of one another."

Pete listened closely while Roy talked to the Indian again, but he still couldn't gather in the meaning of the words. He heard the Navajo talk come out of Roy's mouth and saw his arm and hand move toward the ruin and then make embracing motions toward Pete, and then himself. Understanding shone in the old man's eyes, and alarm, too, as Pete had seen it, as Roy's arm went out and returned again.

As far as understanding it, Pete wasn't any better off when the old man replied to Roy. He heard him say *"chindi"* a couple of times, but that was about the sum of it. He figured he was only going over the old ground, anyway, so it didn't matter.

"Well, you had that much of it right," Roy said when they had stopped. "He said he saw you up there and tried to call you down. It's *'chindi,'* like he says, for anyone to go up there."

"Well, he can believe that if he wants to," Pete said, "but I don't see what my going up there has to do with him. I wasn't interfering any with his affairs."

"According to the way he thinks, you were," and Roy had a little smile tugging at his lips. "Your going up there was about to upset all his calculations."

"Calculations?" Pete said. He didn't get it. He wondered what an old man like this would have by way of calculations. And for what.

"He's a medicine man, Pete," and now Roy was smiling openly. "He calls himself Wind Singer. He's on a kind of visit down here making big medicine."

The old man seemed to understand the nature of Roy's explanation, for he suddenly straightened up with frowning dignity. His bright eyes grew severe and sharp.

The meaning of it all began to percolate through Pete's head. "And my going up there to that 'chindi' place had him thinking I'd break the medicine spell," he said as it all at once dawned upon him.

"You couldn't have said it better in Navajo," Roy told him.

"Golly, I don't know why I didn't think of that. I was trying to figure out what he was doing down here, away from the reservation, but I sure didn't think of that."

Pete looked at Wind Singer with a new interest. He wondered if he saw a hint of humor in the old man's eyes.

"That's the case, Pete," Roy said. Roy looked up at the old pueblo in the cliffs before he went on again. "He hasn't told me everything, but I've got a notion he has some special reason for being in this particular place. We'll take it kind of slow; sooner or later we'll find out. But we might have to take our time."

"I tried to tell him what we were looking for," Pete said, and he thought again of his clumsy imitation of the horses and the bear. "I tried to make up a kind of sign language that'd make him understand. I made off I was a horse hopping around and eating grass, but that didn't get across to him. Then I acted like a bear, and he ran away. That's when you came around the bend."

Roy thought this over for a moment, and then started in to talk to Wind Singer once again. This time Roy moved his arms toward Pete, and once it looked as though he was trying to be a bear himself.

All at once Wind Singer's face lit up with comprehension, and then his head went back and his mouth opened in silent laughter. When he had sobered down again, he smiled at Pete.

"Ya-ta-heh," he said, and smiled broadly with no teeth.

"Ya-ta-heh," Pete said; then he turned to Roy and said, "He said that before, when I made him understand we wouldn't sleep in the ruins. What does it mean, anyway?"

Roy was smiling widely, too. "It means a lot of things. It means 'hello,' 'good,' 'good time,' 'how are you?' In this case, I think it means 'good show.' "

"Oh," Pete said, "so that's how it is. Well, what's the joke about, anyway?"

Roy's smile had become a laugh, but then it quieted to a smile again. "It's all right, Pete. Nobody's trying to make a fool of you."

"The way I feel now, it looks like it's already been done a number of times," Pete said, looking from one to the other and seeing the lingering amusement in each.

"Wind Singer's got a yarn to spin us. He's asked us to join him at his hogan for the night. He's put one together in here somewhere as a shelter during his stay."

Pete thought before he answered. "I suppose we might as well. It wouldn't do much good to go on out again, would it?"

"No, it wouldn't, Pete. We're better off to stay right here till morning."

"All right," Pete said, and then he paused. "But I'd sure like to know what the big joke is." It still bothered him to think there was something going over his head.

"Well, Wind Singer knows something about the bear," Roy said. "As a matter of fact, he's looking for him, just like us. He finally worked your prancing out to mean a bear, but as you'd been in the *'chindi'* place he was a little spooky of you. The way he saw it, you weren't playing any bear; you were a sure-enough ghost of one right there before him, a first-class *espiritu,* taking on man's form to wreck his medicine."

"Well, I'll be dogged," Pete said. It sure made sense, now that he thought about it.

"Ya-te-heh!" the old man named Wind Singer said suddenly.

"Ya-ta-heh!" Pete said. "A pretty good show, at that."

Wind Singer led them around the bend about fifty yards, behind a massive monolith which lay nearly against the cliff itself, yet allowed room enough for passage. They passed through a small grove of juniper, and then into a bowl or hollow in the midst of a wild tumble of blocks and boulders rising all around it.

They were not more than a hundred yards from the cattle trail, but the place seemed in another world altogether.

The hogan faced east, as the Navajo gods directed, and was a rounded hut, the base of which was built of random fallen timbers, and whose walls were formed of intertwined saplings and brush and chinked with mud. The framework for the rounded room was formed of saplings also, but it was shielded against the weather by an old tarpaulin spread across the top, and staked at the corners.

The whole thing was not more than four or five feet high and they had to stoop to go through the door.

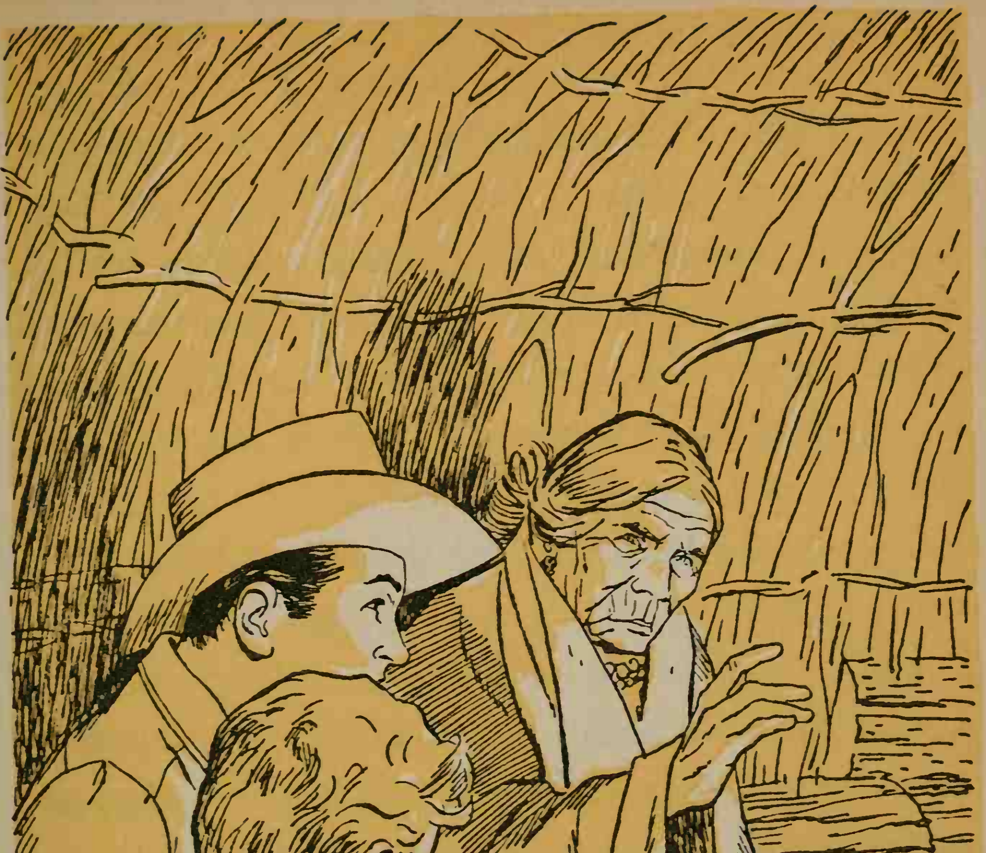
Pete knew there was a certain form to be followed, and he was glad Roy was there to show the way. Wind Singer entered first, and Roy let a space of time pass before he stooped down and went in. Pete followed Roy, sticking close to him because it was absolutely black inside for the moment. He was brought up short by Roy's back, and there was more waiting before they moved again.

Then they went to the left, around the south wall to the west where Wind Singer sat upon his folded legs, facing east. They each clasped the old man's hands, without shaking them, and after that they returned along the west wall to the south where they sat on blankets covering the packed earth floor.

Then there was a moment or two of quiet before any conversation was begun.

Presently Wind Singer began to talk, and every now and then he would pause to give Roy a chance to put the Navajo tongue into English.

"He's come from away up in the Lukachukai Mountains near the Colorado and New Mexico border country," Roy began in the first silence. "He says he's a medicine man, but he's been having some kind of trouble with his rituals."



Pete looked at Wind Singer's face showing dimly in the semi-darkness. He wondered if some of the old man's magic had backfired on him.

"He says an old and well-known remedy for that kind of situation is to get a hold of some particular animal and use certain parts of it in the ritual. He won't say exactly what these are, but they're sure enough bound to make medicine good again."

"In this case, it's a bear, then, isn't it?" Pete said. "A grizzly bear?"

"That's right," Roy said. "I guess he figures there couldn't be a stronger medicine made than of a grizzly."

There was more talk out of Wind Singer, and pretty soon Roy had something to say about it. Pete couldn't get over the idea that there was something unreal about all this medicine and ritual business, but he knew the old man believed in it. And as Juan would say, *quien sabe?*

"Well, it so happened that an old he-grizzly came down through the Lukachukais about this time," Roy went on. "Wind Singer picked up the trail and tracked it all the way across the Navajo country to the Rim. When it came down here he came right along behind; and when he figured out it was going to winter in this country, he set up camp and set about working out a way to kill it."

"It's in here, then?" Pete said. "Right in this canyon here?"

Roy put the question to Wind Singer and after Wind Singer had made some gutturals in his throat, Roy turned to Pete again.

"He says the bear is in and out of this particular canyon where we are. He's come upon half-covered calf kills, and he knows about the steer we found. From looking around the basin some, he's figured, as we have, that the bear is mostly along this side of it, and in this canyon."

"Well, it's like we thought, then," Pete said. "Ask him about the horses, Roy. Maybe he's seen them in here someplace. If he hasn't seen them, either dead or alive, it could be a good sign; they may be somewhere else."

Roy put the question into Navajo, and that time there was a long look put upon Pete by Wind Singer. Then he had a question of his own.

"He wants to know if you were trying to be a horse and a bear, too, when you did your little dance for him," Roy said.

"I sure was," Pete said. "I told you that. I tried horses first, and then the bear."

"I guess I put it to him badly," Roy said. "He only got the bear part, it looks like."

Roy spoke to Wind Singer again, and when he finished the old man nodded. Then he gathered the blanket around his shoulders, pushed himself to his feet, and went in a stooped position toward the entry.

"He wants us to follow him," Roy said, and Pete was suddenly afraid. He was all at once afraid that Wind Singer was taking them to Rusty's and Molly's bones.

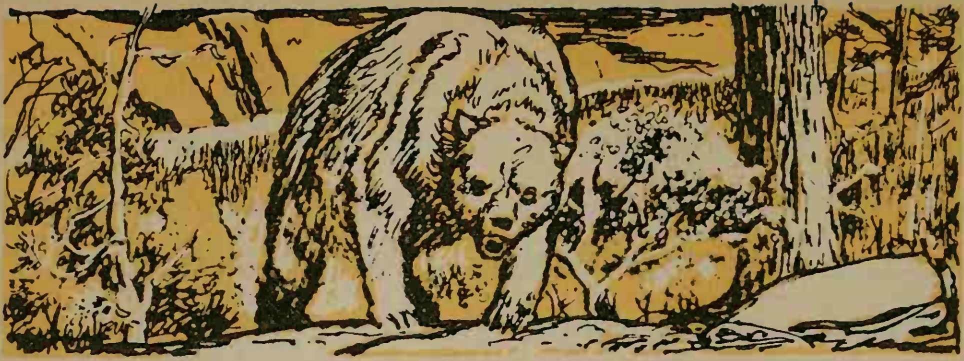
It was colder by a good deal outside now, but Pete didn't think of it beyond taking vague note of the fact. It wasn't more than half an hour to dark, but he didn't think about that either, except to realize that, for all their time-saving, going up separate branches, it was beginning to look like they hadn't saved Rusty or his ma.

It was all dark misery and foreboding deep inside him. He walked in a kind of trance wondering when they would come upon the carcasses. He tried to think how much he blamed himself for getting the little colt and Molly into this, but he couldn't find a measure for it.

He knew he would hate himself for the remainder of his life.

The way led out behind the hogan and farther into the wilderness of tumbled rock. After a while they pressed close to the towering canyon wall again. They were still near the hogan when a crevice, or narrow opening, appeared of a sudden in the wall of rock. Pete saw the crude gate of saplings built across the five-foot slit, and the widening of the small box canyon on the other side.

Looking in, he saw a flop-eared burro that must belong to Wind Singer. Then he saw Rusty and Molly looking at him.



CHAPTER 10 • Demon at Night

It was nearly full dark by the time Pete got used to the idea of Rusty and the mare being as alive and healthy as they had ever been. The colt was a pretty big fellow, but Pete held him in his arms and talked to him and rubbed his head and nose the way he had when Rusty could hardly stand. Even Molly seemed glad to see him once again, as though she had had enough of this wandering in the wilderness.

After a while he felt the cold biting into him and saw the rocks turn dull and dark, and he knew that night was coming on. He heard Roy talking to him, but still he didn't want to leave.

"We better get back to the hogan, Pete," Roy was saying now, "afore we all turn into a bunch of icicles."

"I sure don't like to leave him, now we've found him," Pete said. “He’ll likely disappear again, like this was just a dream I had.”

Roy laughed a bit, and even Wind Singer seemed to smile, as though he had caught the sense of it.

“Well, it may be a dream to you,” Roy said, “but the feel of winter makes it real enough for me. He’ll be waiting for you in the morning.”

Pete stood slowly erect and looked around. The mystery of the darkness seeping through the canyon seemed to hint of danger, and he thought about the bear.

“I don’t like to leave him in this place,” he said to Roy. “They wouldn’t have a chance if the bear took a notion to get at them. Can’t we stake them out somewhere near the hogan?”

Roy looked around at the reaching walls, then put the question into Navajo. Old Wind Singer moved his arms and nodded and shook his head, then pulled his blanket around him tighter.

“He says the bear can’t get to the corral without going past the hogan first. These walls go straight up for three thousand feet on all sides, and the only way into the hogan and this place is through that little passage back there beside the wall.”

Pete couldn't see the crest of the Rim any more, but the walls looked sheer enough. Still, he didn't like the idea of leaving Rusty in this place. If the wind kicked up a gale he might be out of hearing should anything go wrong. He didn't want to push their luck too far.

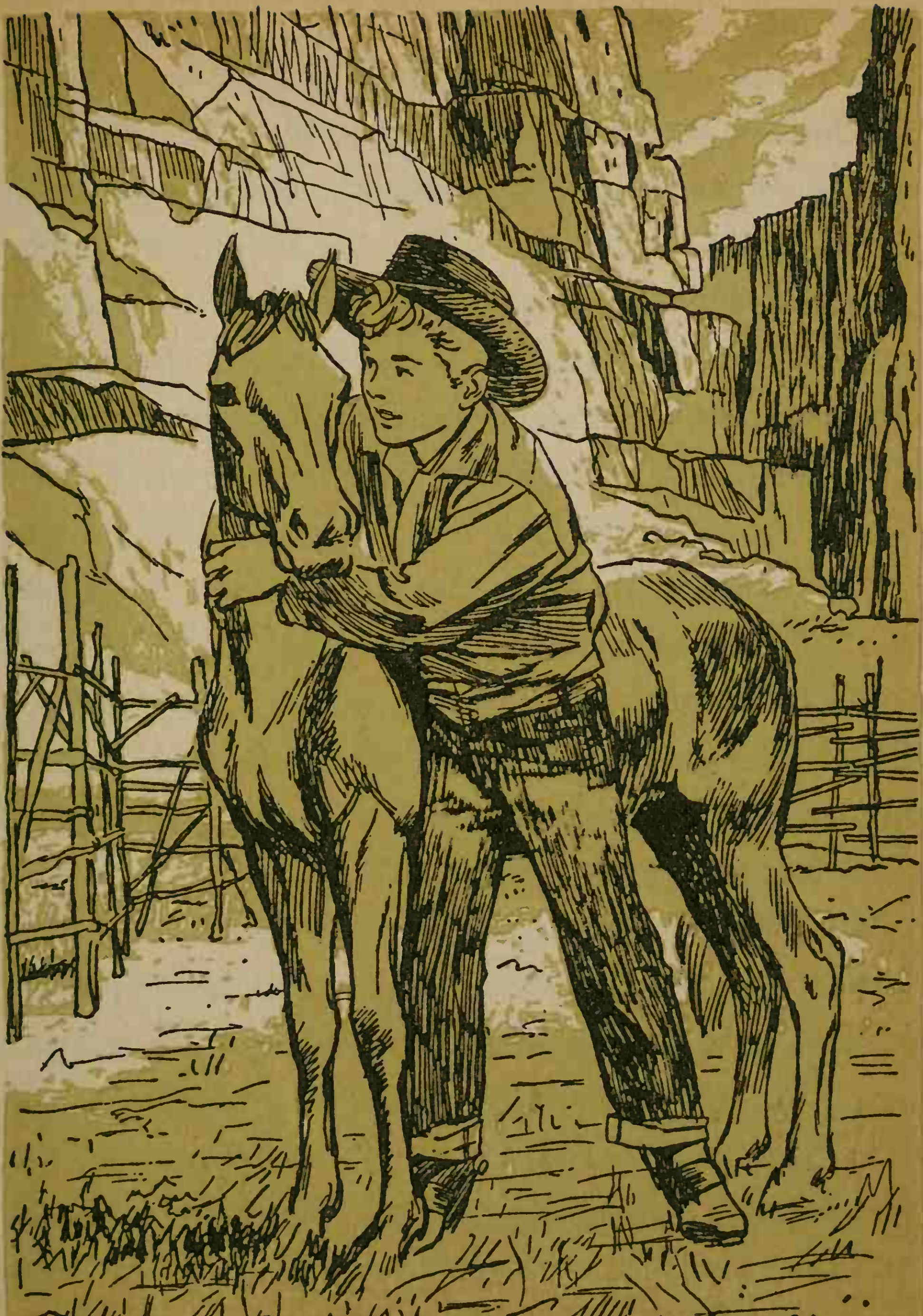
"I'll give Bullet the job of taking care of them," Roy said, as though he sensed the doubt still lingering in Pete's mind. "There won't be any question about our knowing what's going on when he thinks we ought to know."

"I guess that would be all right," Pete said. "As long as there's no way in except past the hogan, we'd sure have plenty of warning."

Roy made some more talk with Wind Singer, who looked at Bullet, and then away in the direction of the hogan. When Roy had got the straight of what the old man told him, he spoke to Pete again.

"The best place for Bullet seems to be right around the hogan. If anything happened we'd have a lot more time to get organized in than if he didn't get a sniff of danger until it was at the box canyon here."

"All right," Pete said, as he thought about it. It would be the best way; Bullet could surely be depended on. "That ought to work out all right. I guess we better get back,



then; I've got to get Buck, too, Roy."

"If we don't go soon someone's going to have to build a fire under me," Roy said. "It must be getting pretty close to freezing."

"Think of what it must be up on top," Pete said, and his pa came suddenly to mind. If there wasn't one thing to worry over, there was another. It didn't seem a person ever got shed of them completely.

They were walking back now, single file, Wind Singer in the lead. Pete wondered if he shouldn't be just a little bit angry with the old man. In his great relief at finding Rusty and the mare, Pete had overlooked the danger to which they may have been exposed by being confined.

What if the bear had come when Wind Singer was down the canyon somewhere?

After Pete staked the bay horse out with Trigger and Alex, he joined the two men about a small hot fire which Wind Singer had built beneath the smoke hole inside the hogan. He put this thought about the bear to Roy in as nice a way as he could think of.

After Wind Singer had waved his arms around and made deep rumbles in his chest, Roy turned to the boy and translated the answer into English.

"He says he found them wandering around in here sometime yesterday," Roy said. "He had an idea they'd been frightened by the bear because they were so skittish. It came to him they'd be as well off in the box canyon with his burro as they would be running loose. At least, if the bear came, he'd have a chance to kill it before it got to them. He wasn't intentionally using them as bait, but if the bear was going to take a crack at them, he was going to be on hand to disarrange things."

"I see," Pete said, and it did make sense now that Pete thought of it. It was better the horses were in the corral than running loose. At least they would have someone's eye on them part of the time. As long as Wind Singer was intent upon the bear he would likely have a notion when it was coming close.

"I guess I owe him something, don't I?" Pete said to Roy; he wondered what he could possibly offer the old man to show his appreciation. Money wouldn't mean much, even if he had some to give.

This time Roy didn't talk to Wind Singer about it. He thought for a moment to himself, and then answered the question directly.

"The most important thing to him is the bear," Roy said. "We could help him track it down. I think it would mean a lot to him."

Pete thought a minute before he spoke. They ought to get the horses out of there, he thought. They ought to get the cattle down. Every sign pointed to a bad storm blowing on the Rim; it could reach the lower elevations in the morning if it got any worse. Still, the bear would remain a menace in the country, and there was a good chance that Wind Singer had saved the horses' lives. They owed him something, sure enough.

"I guess we can have a crack at it," Pete said after he had done his best to work it out. "How do you want to go about it?"

Roy went into a long confab with Wind Singer on the matter. There were a lot of gestures and much talk.

As they had begun to eat by now, Pete had himself a piece of boiled jerky and a hard biscuit while he waited. He didn't know whether he ought to try any of that seething, bubbling mass that the old man had put together in an iron pot. Medicine men were sometimes said to have unusual appetites, and Pete didn't want to take a chance on getting something like a lizard in his mouth.

When the two men had everything arranged, Roy turned to Pete again. "We'll try the branch canyon that I was in this afternoon," he said. "Wind Singer thinks the bear hangs out in there sometimes. Maybe we can come across some sign that Bullet can hang onto better."

"We'll do that tomorrow, do you think?" Pete said.

"The sooner the better," Roy said.

"Ought to take about a day to do it right, don't you think?" Pete said. "If we go to the basin and back?"

"About that. We'll go slow, and take it easy. I don't know what good we can do, but we can try. If the bear hits the cliffs we'll likely have to give it up. We're not equipped for a real hunt, and he'll have to be pretty much in the clear for us to get anywhere."

"It may turn out that Pa will have to organize a hunt later on," Pete said. "I don't think he'll want that bear in here, even with the stock taken down."

"No, he won't," Roy said. "Maybe we can save him the trouble, maybe not. If we don't hit luck tomorrow, though, we'll have to start moving the stock out. Wind Singer understands about that, and agrees."

"I guess that's the best way, then," Pete said. Then he thought again, as another point arose in his mind. "What about Rusty and his ma? I don't think we all should leave here, and it won't be easy taking them along."

"No, nor Alex either," Roy said.

Roy stared upward through the smoke hole as though he sought an idea up there, then began again.

"If you don't mind, it might be a good idea if you stay here and keep an eye on them. I don't like to split up again, but it seems to be the only way. We could leave Wind Singer here, and you and I go, but he seems to have ideas as to where the bear can best be located."

"It's all right with me," Pete agreed. "Likely, it would go faster that way. I don't mind sitting around for the day at all."

The prospect didn't bother him in the least. Everything was different now that Rusty and his ma were safe again.

"You better keep the rifle here, just in case," Roy said. "I've got the pistol, and Wind Singer has his bow and arrows. Neither one are too much, but together they might produce results."

Pete took a long look at the medicine man as he thought about the bow and arrows. The old man must have a lot of courage and determination to hunt a grizzly with such a flimsy weapon. But, then, the Indians had done pretty well with them in the past.

They left it that way and got themselves ready to turn in for the night. The three of them would sleep inside the hogan, with the fire banked, but still alive, and Bullet would stay outside the entry in the lee of the wall. He seemed to understand what was expected of him when Roy explained things to him.

Before they put the bedrolls down, Pete went out to take the horses off the picket ropes and put them in the box canyon with Rusty, Molly, and the burro. It was bitter cold by this time, and the wind had sure enough come down, and was now surging through the canyon passages and defiles in screaming swoops. He thought he felt the sting of random grains of snow carried on it, but he wasn't sure, and the darkness didn't allow him any light to see by. The clouds lay solidly across the sky and he knew there would be no starshine coming down tonight.

After he made sure that Rusty was as comfortable as could be expected in such a place, Pete returned to the hogan and slid into the folds of his bedroll, which Roy had already spread for him. Both Roy and Wind Singer were stowed away, and the faint light from the dying embers showed them to have the look of approaching sleep upon them. He didn't disturb them with a lot of talk.

His head had hardly hit his folded hat when he was sound asleep, it seemed. Before he even closed his eyes he knew he was going to sleep tonight. He was just about as dead tired as he had ever been.

Everything was all right now, and there wasn't any trouble with relaxing. They had found the horses, and sooner or later they would get the bear. They would get the stock down, too, he told himself. There would be losses, likely, from the bear, but the biggest share would be all right.

And most certainly, his pa was safe and warm at the ranch with Juan by now; he felt it in his bones. Finding Rusty had put a different face on everything.

He slept and then he awoke again. There was a gap in the night which seemed to indicate he had slept a good long while, but now he was awake; not stretching slowly out of slumber, but like a cat. He was wide awake all over in an instant, as though an electric impulse had shocked through him, keying every sense at once.

He hadn't even turned his mind to wonder what strange presence had disturbed his sleep, when the night was shattered by the frenzy of Bullet's barking and snarling outside the hogan.

After that it got confusing and all run-together for a moment. It went so fast that there wasn't any separating one thing from another. Pete was nearest the entry but he didn't get there first. He came out of his bedroll all in one motion and groped for the rifle on his hands and knees, but failed to find it right away.

At the same time somebody collided with him violently, then passed over him, and then another went after the first, but this time didn't strike him. By the time he picked the rifle up he heard a blurring roar of gunfire, and thought that would be Roy fanning his revolver at the intruder. Then he heard a soft twang and a sighing sound; then a furious snarling mixed with the echo of gunfire and the arrow's whistling.

The snarling was not Bullet this time, but a larger animal in pain.

When he emerged at last, the sound had died away, except for Bullet's barking outside the passage near the wall, and Roy's calling for him. Roy was out there, too, in the inky darkness, and for a moment there was only Wind Singer by the hogan, fitting another arrow to his bow.

It made Pete feel a little foolish to be the last one out, and nothing to shoot at any more.

Then Roy came back, with Bullet running here and there, and whining. The dog was all of a growl and bristle, and except for Roy's command it looked like he would take off again.

"I guess I was kind of slow," Pete said. He was still feeling foolish over it; he felt as if he had been tried and found lacking. "I couldn't find the rifle."

"That's all right," Roy said. He was standing with his legs spread and his hands on his hips, breathing deep. "If we'd all hit the entry together, we'd likely be inside yet."

"I sure wish I'd have got a shot," Pete said. "It was the bear, wasn't it? I heard plenty of snarling."

"It sure was the bear," Roy said, and this time he let a soft laugh come out. "I guess he came to look us over."

"Did you hit him?" Pete asked. "I heard him yell in a way that sounded like it."

"I think we both did, although it's hard to say how bad." Roy spoke to Wind Singer in the Navajo tongue, and Wind Singer nodded his head and smiled with no teeth. Then the old man stretched his bow and released it, and grinned again.

"But, anyway, there's a good blood trail," Roy went on.

He turned back toward the passage where the bear had been and Pete went with him. As they came to the place where the monolith leaned its vast bulk against the wall, Roy pointed at the dark blotches on the ground, standing clear to view even in the night. "There's some."

Pete stared at the sign and thought again of the raging snarl he had heard. Wind Singer passed behind them and pointed out some more, farther out. He spoke to Roy, who nodded, and looked out into the canyon proper.

"Wind Singer says he should be easy to trail this way. If he doesn't take to the crags and head for a hide-out, we'll do better than if he hadn't come at all."

Pete and Roy watched as the old Indian walked a way out into the canyon. His head was bent toward the trail, his blanket wrapped tightly about him. In the eerie moonlight he was like a statue come to life.

"Guess he feels pretty bad about losing the bear," Pete suggested.

Roy nodded. A moment later, the old man turned and headed back toward them.

"Looks like an hour or better to first light," Pete said as he looked at the sky and thought about it. It was hard to tell with the clouds up there. "Will you wait awhile?"

"Best to," Roy said. "An hour won't make much difference—as long as it doesn't snow."

"Only been some flurries so far," Pete said. "It kind of feels like we might get something, though."

"We'll have to wait, anyway," Roy said. They were returning to the hogan now, walking single file. Pete saw his breath in a faint cloud before his face. "It's too rough in this canyon for the horses to work in darkness. Particularly when there may be ice."

"That's right," Pete said, and he wished that it was daylight. Now that there was a trail to follow, there was a chance they could get this bear in a hurry. He was anxious now to get it over with.

"Guess Bullet won't get any more sleep tonight," Roy said with a chuckle. "Listen to him. He's going to be watching for that killer every minute—hoping that he might get one more chance at him."

"Do you think he's all right out there, Roy?" Pete asked worriedly. "What if the bear decides to come back for another look around? He'll really be mean, now that he's been wounded."

"Not a chance," Roy replied. "Not tonight. And even if it did happen, Bullet would give us plenty of warning so we could help him out if necessary, Pete."

Inside once more, they all lay down, but there was no sleep any more for them. Pete heard Bullet mumbling and muttering through the wall outside, and his mind kept hearing the pain-crazed roaring of the bear.

He would be easier to trail, as Wind Singer and Roy had said, but the wounds would make him a demon now.

CHAPTER 11 • Company!

With first light they were up again, and Pete poked the fire up and put the coffee on while the other two got ready. Even though he knew he would likely enjoy himself spending the day with Rusty, he wished he was going with them on the bear's trail now. With the blood trail to follow, the chance was the best they would likely have, and he would like to do his part in bringing that stock-killer down.

"Hard to say when we'll be back," Roy said. They had finished eating and were outside now, about to shove off. Trigger was blowing clouds of vapor in the cold air, and stamping as if he knew there was something coming up; but Wind Singer's burro looked as though it might enjoy another snooze. "Be no later than dark, anyway. Likely sooner."

"I'll keep a fire going for you," Pete said. "You better go.

now; looks like snow flurries starting in."

"Dawgone if it doesn't," Roy said. "Be just our luck to have that blow settle down on top of us."

"I don't think there'll be too much in here," Pete said. "Most of it always seems to land up on top somehow. Pa says it drifts sometimes in the basin, though."

"That could make a difference for tomorrow," Roy said, "but we'd best save that bridge for crossing when the time comes."

Then Roy necked Trigger around and put his hand up in a wave. The burro opened one eye and moved ahead as Wind Singer nudged him with the heels of his moccasin boots. Roy was already in the passage, leading out, and in another moment they were both gone.

Pete had a little more to eat, then built the fire up. It was going to be a cold day, and while the hogan walls blocked the wind, the cold still seeped in. The sky was all gray, iron gray, with heavy, solid clouds moving over east and south.

They were snow clouds, sure enough, and not an end to them in sight. It would be a foot deep and more on the Rim by now, and piling to a man's height in wind-blown drifts. He was sure glad he wasn't up there wandering around in it. He wished he could be sure his pa was off the top of Mingus Mountain by this time. He surely ought to be, but just the same it would be good to know.

He worked on the fire until he got it small and hot, Indian fashion, and then he took the rifle and walked back to the box canyon where the horses were. He doubted whether he would need the rifle any more; since the bear hadn't attacked when wounded he likely wouldn't hang around and ask for more. But still there wasn't any sense in taking chances. He made sure the magazine was full, and he levered a cartridge into the chamber, just in case.

Rusty and his ma looked none the worse for wear, and it didn't seem the storm nor all the excitement of last night had bothered them. Likely they had gotten wind of the grizzly, too, but they weren't showing any fear or nervousness. Right now they were prancing here and there and showing playfulness, even Alex; and the thought came to him it would be a nice thing to take them out and let them have a run. But a look at Molly's glinting eye said that wouldn't be the part of wisdom.

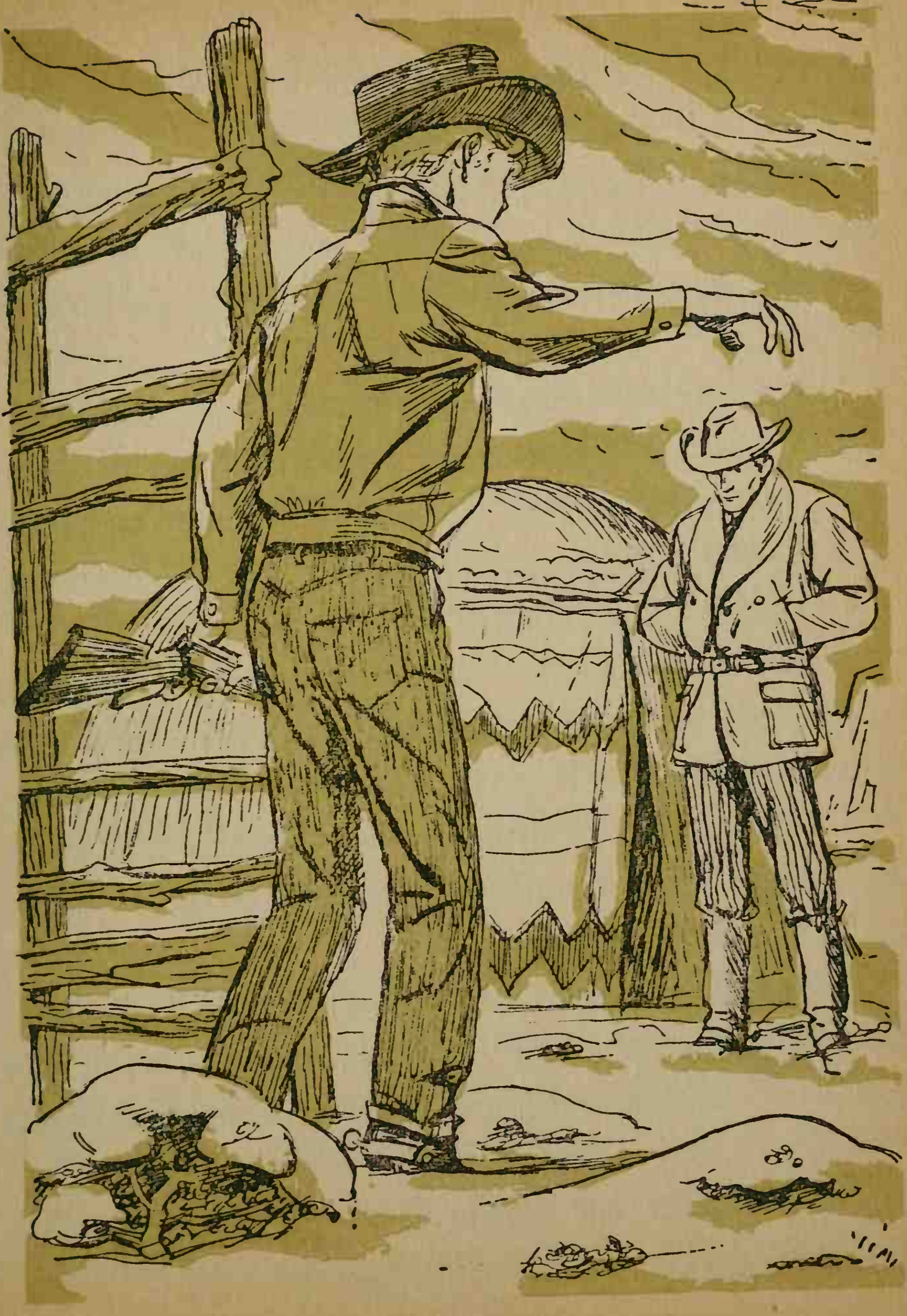
He didn't feel like undergoing all this effort and anxiety again.

He went inside to check their feed, and the grass seemed adequate, although another day or two might cut it pretty low. The spring still flowed in its running trickle from the far wall, and the small pool at its base hadn't frozen over yet. Only thin rim ice had had a chance to form with the surface water moving, and the horses forever pushing their noses into it. All in all, it was a pretty good place for a horse to be, if he had to be cooped up for a time somewhere.

Pete hung around for an hour, talking to them, playing with them some. When he went back, he found the man standing outside the hogan.

Pete stopped in mid-stride, then went ahead again, more slowly. The man was middle-sized with slender features, and simply standing with the collar of his heavy wool Mackinaw turned up, looking at him. The man's face didn't seem to say much except that he was cold. There looked to be an awful lot of snow on his dark, wide-brimmed hat, and on the shoulders of his Mackinaw, as though he had spent a piece of time in the storm somewhere.

Pete wasn't scared; he was surprised. And then even the surprise went partly away when he thought of all the



other peculiar things that had occurred in here. A snow-covered, cold-faced man didn't seem to be so astonishing.

"Howdy." The man spoke first, as Pete came to the hogan. "I was out there in the canyon beyond them rocks and smelled the smoke from your fire. I'm about froze to death."

"I guess it's a good thing I built it up," Pete said. "You might have passed right on by, otherwise."

"And bad luck for me," the man said. "This'd be a hard place to find without some kind of help. I don't know how much longer I'd have lasted."

As the man said this, Pete became aware that he was leaning on the hogan for support, and it came over him that the stranger had been out in the blow for quite a while. Pete wasn't too familiar with people in distress, but he knew this man needed warmth and good hot food. His sense of hospitality decided him.

"You better get inside there," Pete said, and he held the blanket back from the entry as the man stooped low. "We got food aplenty, and warmth, too. You're welcome to the best of it."

The man spoke again when he sat against the far wall, facing toward the door. He pulled his hands from his pockets and Pete saw the brittle stiffness of them as the fire flickered underneath, warming them.

"I sure do thank you," the man said. "I can't tell you what this fire means. Sometimes a fire's worth about a million dollars, I guess. I walked all night long dreaming of one."

Pete put another piñon branch upon the blaze when he heard that. He didn't say anything right away, but he thought about it. He was wondering why this man hadn't camped somewhere and built a fire.

As though to answer it, the man went on. "I was up on top," he said, and his head moved upward as though to indicate the Rim, far above.

"Oh," Pete said, and he could understand it now. It wouldn't be an easy thing to put a fire together in a blizzard. "I suppose you figured it was best to keep heading for the canyon, here."

"I would have figured that way, had I known about it. As it was, I just kind of stumbled on this place. I'd lost my gear, and couldn't build a fire anyway. It seemed best to keep moving, else I'd freeze to death."

"That was the best thing, all right," Pete said.

He was busy fixing food now. A lot of questions had come up in his mind about the man, but there wasn't any sense in pushing him. Let him talk it out his own way, that was the best; he would likely give the whole of it when he was fed.

There were biscuits and bacon, and a cup of steaming coffee, then another. Pete ladled out some of Wind Singer's stew, if that's what it was, for the stranger, too. What he didn't know about it wouldn't hurt him, and anyway, a starving man wasn't likely to turn his nose up at nourishment, no matter what it was. Pete wished he could remember if he had seen a lizard peeping out of that stuff or not.

But the man ate with relish, and passed his plate back, and ate again. He finished up the remainder of the sliced bacon, and the biscuits, and he even had another scoop of the stew. By this time, his face had lost its pinched and frozen look, and was red and mobile from sitting by the fire.

"I guess you ought to feel some better now," Pete said. "You surely look it. You look thawed out to me."

"I feel a whole lot better; no doubt about that. I can't think when I've been so hungry. I bet I could have ate a rattlesnake, tail and all."

"Well, a rattlesnake isn't bad," Pete said. "The meat is white, and pretty tasty. A little bit like chicken, it seems to me; not that I've had a lot."

When the man didn't follow up on that, but simply turned his hands above the fire, Pete moved on to another subject.

"I didn't see your horse out there. If you've got one I can put him in the box canyon out in back with ours. Grass and water enough for another day or two."

"No, I didn't have a horse. I don't think I could have got him into this place, anyway. I was lucky enough to come upon a game trail coming down, but I never could have brought a horse in over it."

The man was leaning back now, warmed and seeming to be more comfortable. He still kept his Mackinaw buttoned up tight, though, as if he wasn't taking any chances on a sudden chill. The shape of it made Pete think he was kind of hefty, though the rest of him didn't look that way.

The man spread his hands out and looked at them. When he folded them across his middle, and got himself adjusted on the blanket, Pete knew he was getting ready to talk a little more.

"Like I said, I was up on top, there. I was with a bunch of other men, hunting; my name's Burton, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you," Pete said, and he wondered if that was the right way to do it. "My name's Pete Allan. My pa runs cattle in this canyon country."

The man named Burton took a lengthy look at Pete before he started up again, and Pete wondered what he did that for. It almost seemed as if he was going to ask him something, but he didn't.

"There isn't much to it," he went on, along the first thought. "I'd got quite a ways off from our camp when the snow started. It was blowing pretty hard, and after a time I knew I was lost. I didn't have a compass—didn't even have a box of matches. I lightened up as best I could, and kept on moving. I even left my rifle up there somewhere."

Pete wondered if he would have done it any differently. He wouldn't like the idea of giving up his rifle, even though it would get awfully heavy. But he would sure enough have sense enough to carry matches and a compass with him. It occurred to him that Burton didn't know much about the country.

"You must be new around here," Pete said, and Burton nodded.

"That's right, I am." Burton let himself laugh a little, sheepish-like. "I'm a sure-enough tenderfoot around this country. This party I was with came up from Tucson. I've never been up this far before."

"It can be a pretty rugged place," Pete said, and he was careful not to let any feeling of superiority sneak into the way he said it. He had a good feeling toward the man named Burton. Tenderfeet didn't always admit to being as useless in the country as they were. Burton might be foolish, but he was honest, anyway.

For the first time, Burton looked around the hogan. It seemed as if he had been concentrating on getting warm and fed up, and now he was ready to take an interest in other things.

"You said your pa runs cattle in here. Is this some kind of line shack for roundup use?"

"No, an Indian built this," Pete said. "An old Navajo medicine man put it together. We just came upon it yesterday." As that didn't seem to tell much, Pete went on with it and told about the horses and the grizzly bear.

"I'm mighty glad I didn't run into that bear," Burton said. "I'd have thought a couple of times about leaving my rifle had I known there was one about."

Burton warmed his hands again, as though the thought of the grizzly had left him suddenly cold.

"He was nosing around in here before daylight," Pete said. "I think we winged him once, anyway. He left a good blood trail." He didn't feel obligated to tell about his fumbling for the rifle in the dark.

"And there's someone out tracking it now, is that it?" Burton said. Burton was looking at his hands as he turned the palms down above the flames.

"Both Wind Singer and Roy are out," Pete said. "Roy's my *compadre,"* he added, and felt curiously pleased to associate himself in this way with Roy.

Burton waited for a moment before he spoke again. It seemed to Pete he was trying to think of something.

"What's that man's name again?" Burton asked. "Your *compadre*—the one who works for you?"

"His name's Roy Rogers, but he doesn't work for us. He was visiting our ranch when all this came up. He was on his way to do a piece of work for the Cattle Association, and just stopped by. They call him King of the Cowboys." All at once Pete stopped, as it came over him that Roy might not like to have his presence in the country talked about.

But Burton didn't seem to make anything of it. His mind appeared to be going off on another point.

"Nice to have such friends," he said. "Your pa must think a lot of him."

"He sure does, only he doesn't know about Roy's being up here in the canyon, or me, either. The sheriff deputized him to trail a bandit, and he had to leave the ranch before we started out."

"A bandit?" Burton's face opened in surprise.

"He robbed a bank at a little town near us—Cottonwood—and killed the teller, too."

"Killed the teller! Holy smokes! Bandits, grizzly bears, and blizzards. I sure picked a fine place for hunting."

"Oh, he's not anywhere around here," Pete said, and once again he had a curious feeling that he shouldn't talk so much. Still, he had started this and he ought to finish. "He's back on Mingus Mountain. They've likely got him now."

Burton seemed to put that out of his head the way he had appeared to forget about Roy.

"I suppose if they get this bear, then you'll be going out of here pretty soon."

"We figure to leave tomorrow," Pete said. "We've got some stock to take down, and this blow makes it important that we hurry. On account of Wind Singer saved the horses we were looking for, Roy's helping him hunt the bear. But if it isn't killed today, we'll have to leave, anyway, to move the stock."

This time there was another silence as Burton looked at the fire and turned his hands. It seemed to be getting mighty warm in the hogan now, and Pete wondered why Burton didn't take his Mackinaw off.

"I wonder if you'd let me go out with you when you leave," Burton said. "I don't know that I could find my way alone. I sure wouldn't want to take a chance on getting lost again."

"I don't see why you can't," Pete said. He spoke before he thought; it was a natural way to be toward strangers in that country. "Got plenty of riding stock. Do you mind going bareback?"

"I'm not much at riding anything," Burton said, "but I guess a feller can do anything if he's got no choice. I'd sure rather ride than walk."

"It's a long ways, that's for sure. Take a couple days, anyway; more with the stock going down with us. You can ride my horse, Buck, if you want. I'll ride Molly; she mightn't go so good bareback."

"Well, I'm sure obliged to you," Burton said. "I'd walk out, if I knew the way; but as long as you're going soon, I'm grateful to go along. When do you think the others will come in?"

"Depends on the weather now, I think," Pete said. "They'd figured to be gone the day, but the snow may change it. I'd better have a look outside."

Pete got up and crouched through the entry, and stood outside the hogan. The snow was moving in twisting swirls on the wind shrieking through the canyon. Not much had been allowed to gather on the level, but the wind had stacked it into drifts in the sheltered places. When he went to the passage, the blast going through the canyon made it hard to see beyond a hundred yards.

"I don't think they'll be out too long now," Pete said when he got back. "She's blowing a near blizzard out there now, and they'll have to give it up."

"I'm mighty glad I'm not on top now," Burton said, and his face showed red and shining with his smile.

"It'd be bad, all right," Pete agreed. He was watching Burton's face, and he saw the drops of perspiration coming off his hairline. "You ought to take that coat off," he added. "You'll get mighty cold again, time you go outside."

"Why, I don't know that I'm all the way warmed up yet," Burton said, and he laughed aloud.

Pete didn't say any more about it. It was Burton's business if he wanted all that sweat to turn to ice. There was no accounting for a tenderfoot's ways at all. That Mackinaw was a heavy thing, too, Pete thought, as he looked at it. Either that, or Burton had a real roll of fat around him there.

For a man whose face and limbs were thin, he surely did pack bulk around his middle.

CHAPTER 12 • Out in the Open!

It was getting on toward the fat side of midafternoon when Roy and Wind Singer returned again. It seemed Pete heard them above the wind as soon as the horse and burro came through the passage, and he wondered if the cold had grown so as to make the hoofbeats louder on the rock and frozen earth.

"I guess they're here," Pete said, and he pushed up to crouch through the entry. "I sure hope they had some luck."

"Do you think they'd pack the bear back here if they got it?" Burton asked. "A grizzly's pretty big."

"They'd just bring certain parts of it," Pete said. "Wind Singer needs them for his medicine. They'd need a packhorse to bring the whole thing in."

Pete hunched through the entry and stood outside, entirely erect as Bullet came running up to him, and then Roy and Wind Singer appeared from the depths of swirling snow, looking like a pair of snow men on their mounts, their shoulders hunched against the wind, and their faces buried.

"Any luck?" Pete said it in a shout as he took the reins of each and held the animals while the men got down. But as he said it he looked around and something seemed to say they hadn't been successful. It wasn't only because he didn't see any tow sack fat and bloody hanging from the burro.

They just didn't have the look of men who had brought a bear to earth.

"No luck," Roy said at last, when he was firmly on the ground and beating his arms with his hands to get his circulation going. "We had a good trail, though, for a while. Then he hit the rock."

"I guess they always do when they're in trouble," Pete said. "Pa says a black, even, will hit for the roughest country in the world when he's got a pack on his tail."

Roy had his back to Pete, pulling off the saddle and the blanket. Pete saw Roy's shoulders rounding with exhaustion. Off a few yards, old Wind Singer looked like a shape-

less, snow-mottled mound as he dismounted wearily. Pete was glad he had thought to put some coffee on the fire for them.

"Yeah, Pete, he hit the rough country, and only Bullet could follow him. I called him out when we dropped back."

"The best thing," Pete said. "A dog can get hurt bad going in alone, when the hunter isn't there to tell him things."

"Then, apparently, he came out again, farther down the canyon. Anyway, we came on the blood trail again, but we'd hardly gotten onto it when the snow started in good and hard, and pretty soon blotted it out. We thought to turn back then." Roy was looking into the falling snow as he explained the way of it, and Pete knew he was seeing the trail again.

"Well, it sure isn't for lack of trying that you didn't get him," Pete said. He wanted Roy to understand he was with him all the way.

"No, I guess it isn't. I wanted to get him bad, though. This snow coming on so hard, so sudden, he's liable to take a notion and den up of a sudden."

"That means he'll be in here for the winter," Pete said.

"And work and worry for your pa, come spring," Roy said, as though to finish the thought that Pete had started.

Pete nodded his head, and then he remembered the man inside the hogan. "We've got a visitor," he said. "You hadn't left but half an hour, maybe an hour, when he showed up. Came in without a horse or anything. Got lost up on the Rim in the storm, he said, and just more or less wandered into the canyon here. Name of Burton."

"That so?" Roy said. Roy sounded surprised, but not particularly interested. "What was he doing up there in a blow like this?"

"Hunting, is what he said. Got separated from his party, somehow. Lost his gear. I guess he was lucky to make it this far."

"He sure was. Another half mile either way, and he'd have missed this canyon altogether."

The two had lifted off their gear, and they stowed it beneath a tarpaulin near the hogan. Pete took Trigger and the burro to the box canyon and put the bridles underneath the tarp when he returned. Bullet was curled up in the snow, looking like an Alaskan sled dog, and Roy and Wind Singer were inside the hogan when Pete entered. They had already made themselves known to the man named Burton.

"I'm sure sorry the snow blotted out your trail for you," Burton was saying to Roy as Pete took a seat on the south wall. "A shame to bring all your hard work to nought. That's sure the way it goes sometimes, though."

"If it hadn't been the snow, it'd likely been the kind of country he was running in," Roy said, as though it didn't matter much. "We weren't really set up to hunt him."

"I suppose now he'll be in here to give trouble next year," Burton said. "Den up, will he? For the winter?"

"More than likely," Roy said. Roy spoke between sips of hot coffee and gave the man named Burton a casual going-over with his eyes. "But he won't do any harm with the cattle taken down. And first thing in the spring Pete's pa can bring a hound pack in and nail him."

"It was mostly on account of Wind Singer they went out for the bear," Pete said, although he knew he had explained the thing before. "Wind Singer caught my colt and his ma, so we owed him something."

"That's right. I remember that."

"It's too bad about his medicine, but he knows we sure tried," Pete said, and he stole a sidewise glance at the old man. Wind Singer was staring at the fire, his face impassive. A person couldn't tell for sure how disappointed he really was. For the first time, it occurred to Pete that the old man would more than likely stay right here and try to find the bear. Time meant nothing, and he had to get his medicine back in shape.

There was a pause and everyone watched Roy put a pan of bacon on the fire. Nobody said anything until the sizzling could be heard, and Roy was sitting back again. Then it was Roy, himself, who spoke.

"I expect you'd like to come out with us tomorrow," he said to Burton. "It's more than likely we can fix you up with a horse."

"I'd sure be grateful if I could," Burton said. "I spoke to the boy about it while you were gone."

"Don't see why you can't," Roy said. "We're going to take some cattle down, though. Might be if we showed you the way you could get down to Pete's place by yourself. You'd save a day, at least, that way."

"It suits me any way you want to do it," Burton said. Burton was being all smiles and pleasantness with Roy.

Roy turned the bacon over with a fork and looked at the other man. It seemed to Pete he had taken note of that Mackinaw at last.

"You ought to take that thing off," Roy said with an easy way about it. "You'll freeze to death when you go outside."

Burton laughed, as he had when Pete had jumped at him the same way. "It still feels pretty good to me," he said. "I keep remembering I walked all night in freezing cold."

"Well, that's a good enough reason," Roy said, and Roy let a little pause come in while he turned the bacon, looking at it carefully. Pete wondered if there was something going on here he didn't know about.

"Pete told me you were hunting up there and got separated from your party," Roy went on again in a little while.

"That's right," Burton said, and he then went on to explain it the way he had for Pete. "I sure was glad to see this place, believe me," he ended up.

"I was, too, half an hour ago," Roy said. "And I wasn't lost."

A laugh came out of everyone, and then Roy looked at Burton once again. This time Pete felt sure there was something here that didn't meet the eye, but still he couldn't place it.

"What were you hunting up there, anyway?" Roy said it real casual-like, but there was meaning in it. Pete wondered now why he hadn't thought to ask the same thing.

"Why—ah—" Burton began, and then fumbled it as though the nature of the game had slipped his mind. He gazed around the hogan, like something in there might suggest the answer to him. "It was elk," he said, and laughed as he remembered. "I guess that night in the open made me forget everything."

"Elk? But the season doesn't open for two weeks yet." It was Pete said it, in surprise before he thought, and at the same time he saw Roy's warning glance, but it was too late for everything had changed. It was as though a second had skipped over in time, so fast did everything occur.

Burton was still smiling, but he wasn't being pleasant any more; the smile was hard and bright. And the hand, which he had so frequently turned above the fire, suddenly and incredibly held a gun pointed at them.

Nobody said anything for quite a while. The gun was pointed across the hogan at them and dominated everything. Pete could hear the breathing coming and going out of each of them. Neither Roy's nor Wind Singer's face said anything at all that he could tell, and he thought how this was all unreal and something he was just imagining. But

Burton was smiling his hard, bright smile, and Pete knew the smile and the gun were not any kind of dream.

"All right, boys, pass the hardware over, and take it easy." It was Burton spoke at last, and his voice was like his smile, thin and mean.

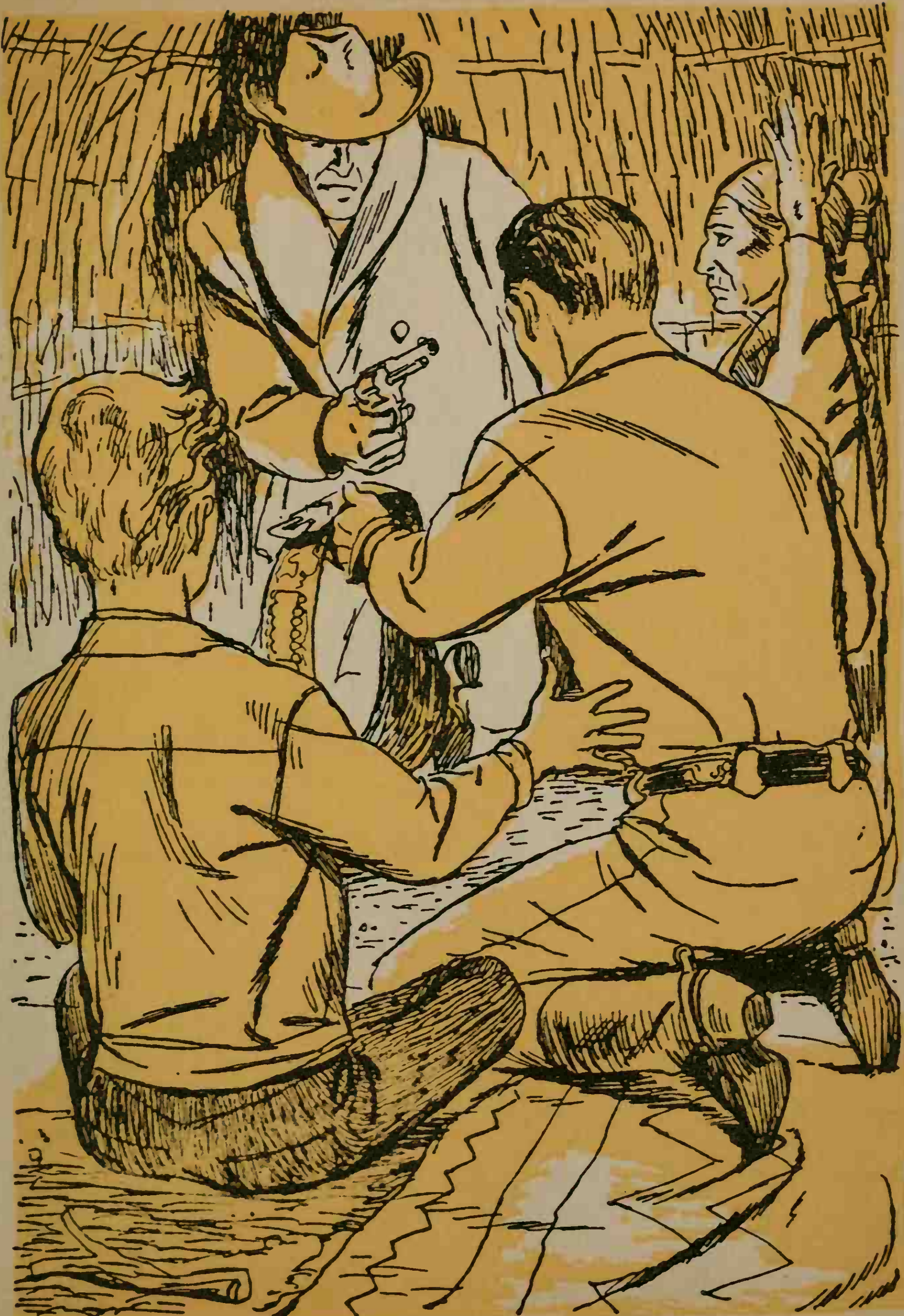
Pete was mighty careful how he passed the rifle over, buttstock first. He couldn't yet figure out why a game violator should compound his original crime by a stick-up, too. The one was bad enough but this was a whole lot worse. From the tail of his eyes, he saw Roy unbuckle his gun belt and pass it over; even Wind Singer gave up his bow and quiver of arrows.

Something sank inside Pete to see Roy's equipment in Burton's hands.

Somehow it was his fault this had happened, Pete thought. "I should have kept my mouth shut, Roy," he said. "I'm sure sorry. I spoke before I thought."

"It's all right, Pete," Roy said. "I was a little slow on remembering your pa's remark about an elk hunt when the season opened. It's just as well it happened this way, though. We know where we stand now, anyway, and that's something."

Up to now Burton hadn't said anything, save to demand



the guns. It seemed to please him to listen to their talk about their predicament.

"The cowboy's right, kid," Burton said to Pete, though his eyes moved back and forth between them all. "It's always good to know where you stand. It's too bad to spoil this pleasant party, but it was bound to happen sometime. Might as well have an understanding right now."

Pete had a notion they were on the edge of something big. It came over him that Burton was something more than he had so far admitted to. He wondered if he was some lawbreaker out of Roy's past, and he remembered how he had told the gunman what Roy's business was. Some day, Pete thought, he would learn to keep his mouth shut.

"I guess an understanding is a good thing, at that," Roy said. "It ought to be safe to take that Mackinaw off now; or, anyway, unbutton it."

"Oh, you worked that out, did you? I heard you had savvy, Rogers. Maybe too much this time."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Remains to be seen who had too much. You're not hiding anything, any more, beneath that thing."

"Just as well you know," Burton said. "It was getting kind of warm." With his free hand, Burton slipped the buttons one by one, and the coat fell open. Pete drew a big breath of air when he saw the sack tied around his middle underneath. The name of the Cottonwood bank was printed boldly on the cloth. Pete was so astonished that he couldn't say a thing.

"I kind of guessed it might be that," Roy said.

"I thought you might, when you commenced to fish around for it," the gunman said. "Too bad you fooled around so long making up your mind."

"I was just giving you the benefit of the doubt, is all," Roy said. Roy leaned back and the killer of Tom Roberts shifted the gun around on him warningly. "There's still time to work this out," Roy added, and smiled at the gun moving over.

"That's right," the killer said. "We'll work it out my way."

"That still remains to be seen," Roy said. He spoke quietly and calmly.

The thoughts and worries poured through Pete, and he found his tongue at last. He wasn't brave and confident as Roy was, but sudden concern about his pa put the fears and wariness aside.

"Where's my pa?" he asked, and he was surprised at the tone of anger and menace in the way he said it.

The killer's face was blank for a moment, until a slow, malicious smile moved over it.

"Well, listen to the tiger speaking up," he said. Pete didn't like the smile.

"Where's my pa?" Pete said again. "You know he was after you; I told you that. Where is he?"

Burton shrugged as though it was a small thing, but he was smiling still. "A lot of guys were trying to track me down. And a pack of dogs, to boot. I winged a couple of them, I think."

"The dogs?" Pete hardly dared to ask it. For the first time the brutal reality of this man sank into him. The eye in his mind took another long look at Tom Roberts lying in a cloud of acrid gunsmoke. This was the man, right here, who had done it.

"Uh-huh, the dogs. Maybe I got a man or two, it's hard to say. I figure they're still running around on top of Mingus Mountain looking for cover to hide behind."

Just to hear the bandit say those things made Pete feel sick inside. Burton had no care for the life of anything, no matter what it was, dog or man. He wondered if his pa had been one of those that had been winged up there on Mingus Mountain.

"This guy's trying to get your back up, Pete," Roy said into the quiet. "He's a coward trying to scare a boy. He's plenty brave around an old unarmed man like Tom Roberts, but he wouldn't have the guts to draw on Bruce, even from an ambush. He's been running ever since your pa picked up his trail."

That time the smile left Burton's face, and a snarl ripped at his mouth.

"Maybe you'd like a taste of lead, Rogers," the killer said. "That ought to salt your bacon for you."

"You wouldn't have the guts to do that, either," Roy said. "To begin with, you're a coward; then again, you're pretty sure to need me in getting out of here."

Roy said all this in the same quiet way, and Pete wondered what was going to happen next. It came to him that Burton figured Roy was just as dangerous without a gun as the other way around. Everything kind of held steady for a second, as though it was in balance and could move any way. Then the bandit relaxed a little, and the mean smile came again.

"I'll deal your hand when the time comes, Rogers," he was saying now. "Maybe it just amuses me to let you live. I might need your help, at that, come to think of it. You know your way around in this place, don't you?"

"Pretty well," Roy said. "Well enough to take you out. That's what you want, I gather."

"How about the kid?" The killer was still keeping his eye on Roy, and Pete knew that Roy had made him plenty nervous.

"I don't know anything about it," Pete said. "I sure couldn't take you out." He didn't take his eyes off the bandit's face. It was the right thing to say, he could tell. It would help to make Roy necessary to the bandit's getting out, and that was something gained. It was time, and time was a mighty important thing.

This time the bandit looked at Pete, and Pete felt the hard eyes picking at him, prying into him. "I thought you told me your pa ran his cattle in here. What you doin' up in this place if you don't know your way around?"

"Roy knew the way," Pete said. "I could never come up this far alone. A feller who doesn't know the country could wander the rest of his natural life trying to get somewhere."

"How do I know that's straight? How do I know this isn't a yarn you're spinning me, kid?"

"You can always shoot me and take the chance," Roy said.

The killer didn't look at Roy. He looked at Wind Singer instead. The old man hadn't taken his eyes from the fire since he had come into the hogan.

"How about you, chief? Can you find your way out of here?" Wind Singer didn't raise his head, and Burton prodded him with the heavy barrel of the gun.

"He doesn't speak English," Roy said. "He only knows Navajo. He doesn't know the way out either. He came in from the north, and dropped down. From the reservation."

"How about it, kid?" Burton said to Pete. "Is that the way it is? No tricks now."

"It's the truth for sure," Pete said. "Roy's the only one who knows. A feller gets lost in here this time of year, he's done for." This time Pete stole a look at Roy from the tail of his eye and could tell that Roy was trying to keep a smile buttoned up inside his mouth.

The killer leaned back again and looked them over for a moment. It seemed as if he wanted to thin their ranks but was afraid to try it.

"I got a hunch the truth ain't in any of you, but I can't take the chance. All right, here's the way of it. You'll take me out in the morning, early. I know this canyon gets to the Verde valley somehow, somewhere, and that's where I aim to go. What happens to you three depends on how you act up to the time we get there."

"Strikes me as a kind of foolish thing," Roy said evenly. "You're going right back in the middle of where you came from."

"Think again, Rogers," the bandit said. "Sure, I'm goin' back there, but it's been searched already. Which means I'm free to go any direction that I please."

When Burton stopped, his mouth smiled again, but not his eyes.

"Not bad, eh?"

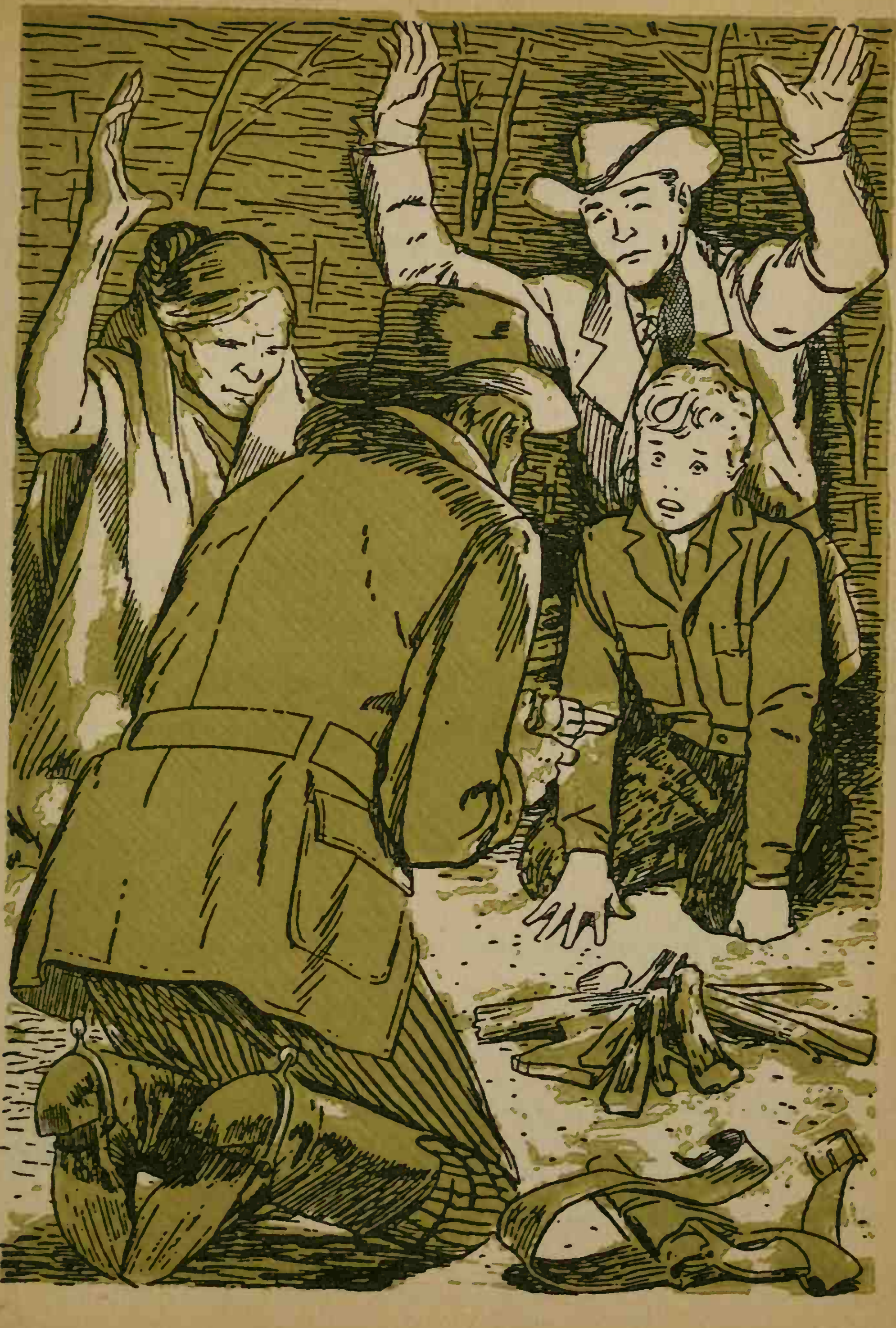
"If it works," Roy said. "If it works."

"I aim to make it work," the killer said. He looked at Pete and motioned with the gun. "C'mere, kid," he said. Pete moved up to his knees, then hesitated.

"Wait a minute," Roy said. "What's all this?"

"I ain't goin' to hurt him none," Burton said, "providing he don't try anything. He's just insurance." He waved the gun at Pete again. "C'mon, kid."

Pete crawled over on his hands and knees. He didn't



suppose more than six or seven feet lay between them, but it seemed like a mile, and he wished it was.

"All right, now turn around," Burton said, and Pete began to get a notion of the scheme. When he had turned all the way, and sat again, the killer put his arm around Pete's neck and tipped him back. Pete felt the pistol barrel in his side. It felt like a log was being poked at him.

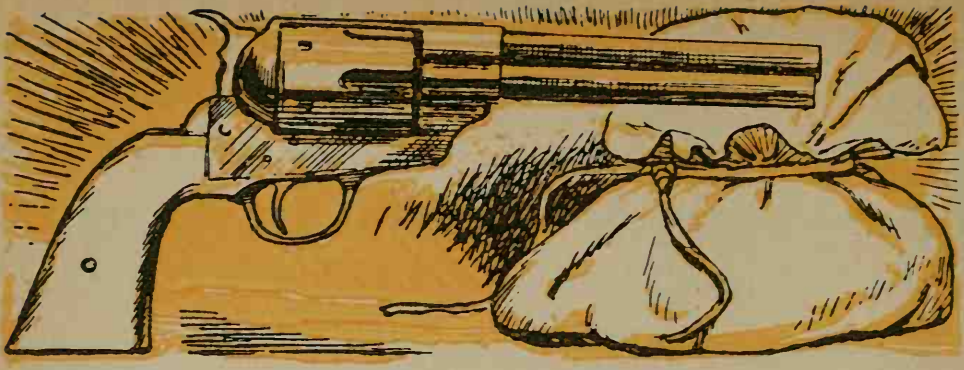
"Aren't you the brave one, though!" Roy said. "Too bad you don't have a woman to hide behind."

"No, this suits me fine," the killer said. "I got a notion you kind of like this kid. I don't think you're going to move around too much should I fall asleep. I don't plan to, but I was walkin' the whole of last night. Just remember where this gun barrel is if you decide to jump."

"I'll remember," Roy said. "I'll remember that a long time."

There was quiet after that. Pete felt the gun in his back, and heard the killer breathing near his ear. For some reason or other he wasn't afraid of him, yet he couldn't think how they were going to shake themselves free of him. He looked at Roy, but nothing of any sort showed in his expression. It seemed like Roy was thinking, figuring, trying to work it out.

Or maybe listening. For the first time, Pete remembered Bullet, and he knew that Roy was listening for him. The man who held the gun didn't know who Bullet was. He didn't even know there was a dog.



CHAPTER 13 • A Dangerous Step

Surprisingly enough, Pete got himself a few hours of sleep despite the killer hovering over him.

A long time after Burton had put the gun against his back, Roy and Wind Singer lay upon their blankets and closed their eyes. Burton waited for half an hour maybe, before he pointed at the floor and nodded so Pete could understand.

Pete thought before he moved, wondering if he could help more by sitting up should Roy decide to make a play. Then he decided any play that Roy might make would not be made in here where they would all be jammed together and exposed to danger; if at all, it would come later on when there was room to move around in. It was a curious thing to think about the possibility of that "if." He knew Roy wouldn't take a chance unless the danger to them could be pretty well eliminated.

When the first of daylight grayed across the smoke hole, Pete felt the gunman stirring over him. He knew he was awake, and now he wondered if he had been all night, or if he had dozed off and on like the rest of them. Burton must have been plenty worn out from trekking all the way from Mingus Mountain.

They all came around at about the same time, as though some kind of unspoken word had got into the mind of each. Pete felt the revolver tap him on the shoulder, and he was sitting up again, to shield the killer, when the others rose. Pete watched Roy stretch his arms carefully, his eyes on Burton all the time, and then Wind Singer did the same, likely thinking it was all right as long as Roy had done it.

"Everybody get a good night's sleep?" Burton said, and laughed. It was plain to Pete that Burton was feeling good. Likely, he was pleased the way the night had gone. That could have been the most dangerous part for him.

"I've had worse," Roy said. Roy was rubbing the back of his neck. "Then again, I've had better."

"Be a good boy, and you might have a few more," Burton said. "How about some chuck, Rogers? Fix it up, pal.

Watch what you're doing and don't forget yourself."

"I'm not liable to," Roy said. In his stretching around, Roy had moved a little, so that his body obscured the entry. Pete didn't think there was any scheme in this until he remembered Bullet still outside, and then he knew Roy wasn't taking a chance on the dog being seen by Burton. Pete began to feel a little excited at the thought of what might happen.

From where he sat, Roy could reach everything he needed. Pete watched him in a fascinated way, as though each motion of his hands had some special, secret meaning.

"All right, now, let's plan the day," Burton said, once the fire was alive and the bacon was in the pan. "What does your riding stock amount to? The kid told me you had an extra horse or two."

"Only two not in use," Roy said. "A mare and her colt. The packhorse carries the gear."

"Didn't you say the mare was kind of lively?" Burton said, and Pete knew the killer was speaking to him.

"Sometimes she is," Pete said, and he experienced the deep wish that he would learn to keep his mouth shut; it was not the first time since the killer had revealed himself to them. It seemed to Pete that he had just stumbled all over himself volunteering information. He would like to think that was his openhanded western manner, but it had the look of ordinary gabbiness.

"I'll ride that packhorse, then," Burton said. "And none of that bareback business, either. You're younger than I am, kid; I'll take the saddle." Burton allowed himself another laugh, and Pete thought again that he was feeling good. If only Pete hadn't spilled the beans on Molly, there might be a chance Burton would have taken a good unloading from her.

If a feller could see ahead as well as he could behind, he would do a whole lot better in the world.

After the bacon was finished, Roy put the biscuits in the bacon grease, and when they were done he piled things on the plates. Nobody said very much while the eating was going on. Even though he had but one free hand to work with, Burton ate in a hurry and he was finished first.

"All right, boys, we're not going to homestead in this place; finish up." Burton ran his sleeve across his mouth and looked at Roy. "Rogers, you go out and bring the horses over here. I'll give you five minutes, then the kid gets hurt. I guess you know enough not to let this little bit of freedom go to your head."

"I don't think so much of your hospitality," Roy said. A biscuit and a piece of bacon still lay untouched on Roy's tin plate. It seemed to Pete that Roy was eating slow. "You could anyway let me finish breakfast; a man ought to have some proper nourishment."

"Take it with you," Burton said. "I don't want any dilly-dallying."

"That's mighty generous of you," Roy said, but all the same he took the biscuit and the bacon off the plate, and all at once it came to Pete that Bullet was going to get some breakfast.

"Now, you get this over quick, and come right back. You know who pays for any tricks. Next time you show, stand out away from the entry where I can see you."

"All right," Roy said. "You sure seem jumpy for a guy who's got everything his own way."

"That's on account I want to keep it my way," Burton said, and then he laughed again.

Roy went out and it was quiet. By making motions, the killer gave Wind Singer to understand that he should roll the blankets and the bedrolls, and put the food and cooking gear in the tow sack. It was disheartening to see how Burton made the old man show him each fork and knife before he dropped it in the sack.

Only a man who knew his business would think of such a thing. Pete wondered if they weren't in a pretty bad fix, at that.

He listened and when he heard the horses coming, he felt anticipation going through him. He wondered if Roy had picked this time as the moment to make a break. Maybe he had Bullet out there somewhere ready to jump at his command. It would give Pete a good deal of pleasure to see Bullet jump this Burton person and throw him to the ground.

When the horses stopped there was a moment of waiting, and then Pete saw Roy through the entry, standing out a few yards, far enough so he didn't crowd and make the gunman nervous.

"All right," Burton said. The killer waved his gun at Wind Singer, and the old man hunched out, with the camp gear and the tow sack in his hands.

"Now you," Burton said to Pete. "On your hands and knees, and slow. When you get outside, stop and stand in front of me. This is a critical step we're taking, kid, don't forget."

"I won't," Pete said. His throat was all at once dry, and his voice croaked. All his blood seemed to be making for his head. He started crawling, wondering what was going to happen; he both hoped and feared that Bullet was going to leap.

The blinding light at the entry made him stop half in and half out, and blink his eyes. For the first time he became aware of the bold blue sky, the white snow drifted over everything, and the intense cold. The storm had passed and the sun was shining brilliantly.

"Get going, kid," and Pete felt the pistol nudge his back. "I said to keep going."

Pete moved ahead again, but slowly now. His eyes were getting accustomed to the light. He was watching Roy, and Roy's hands looked to be telling something. The fingers were pointing downward, and moving slightly. Pete felt Roy's eyes boring into him to get the meaning over. Pete kept down, waiting for a sign.

He was all the way out now, but still down. He felt the killer fill the door behind him, and pause, waiting for him to rise.

"Get up," Burton said. The killer's voice had a rough, grained edge. "Don't stay down there all day. I said to stand and I mean it."

Pete made a slow move to push himself up, then stopped as he heard the low whistle come from Roy. At the same time Pete turned his head to look, Bullet began his savage barking from the rocks. He was thirty yards or so away, and hard to find in the blinding sunlight. His color merged beautifully with the light and shadow, the snow, the rock and brush.

Pete felt the killer ram him from behind, and knew he was alarmed and trying to stand and see. Pete bent his head around in a quick look and saw Burton squinting at the cliff side, his head turning with uncertainty, the pistol waving here and there.

It all happened quick, in less time than Pete could take to think about it. Bullet's bark and Burton's bewildered look had hardly happened when Pete saw Roy coming like a shadow and he flattened himself as Roy went over him and lunged. He tried to rise, to roll, and then his feet, which were driving at the ground, skidded on the new-formed ice, and he slipped and fell.

That was when Burton dropped on top of him, flung his arm about his neck, and pulled him back—hard. Roy was there, somewhere, still, but everything had changed again, and slowed.

Pete felt the gun against his back once more, and he knew that they had failed.

Burton lay with Pete pulled tight against him as Roy backed off, his hands raised above his head. The killer's voice was calm and quiet, and seemed the more deadly on account of it.

"That was a clever notion, Rogers. You didn't count on the kid bein' so clumsy, though."

Burton's arm was tight around Pete's neck, but the pain was nothing like the humiliation that he felt.

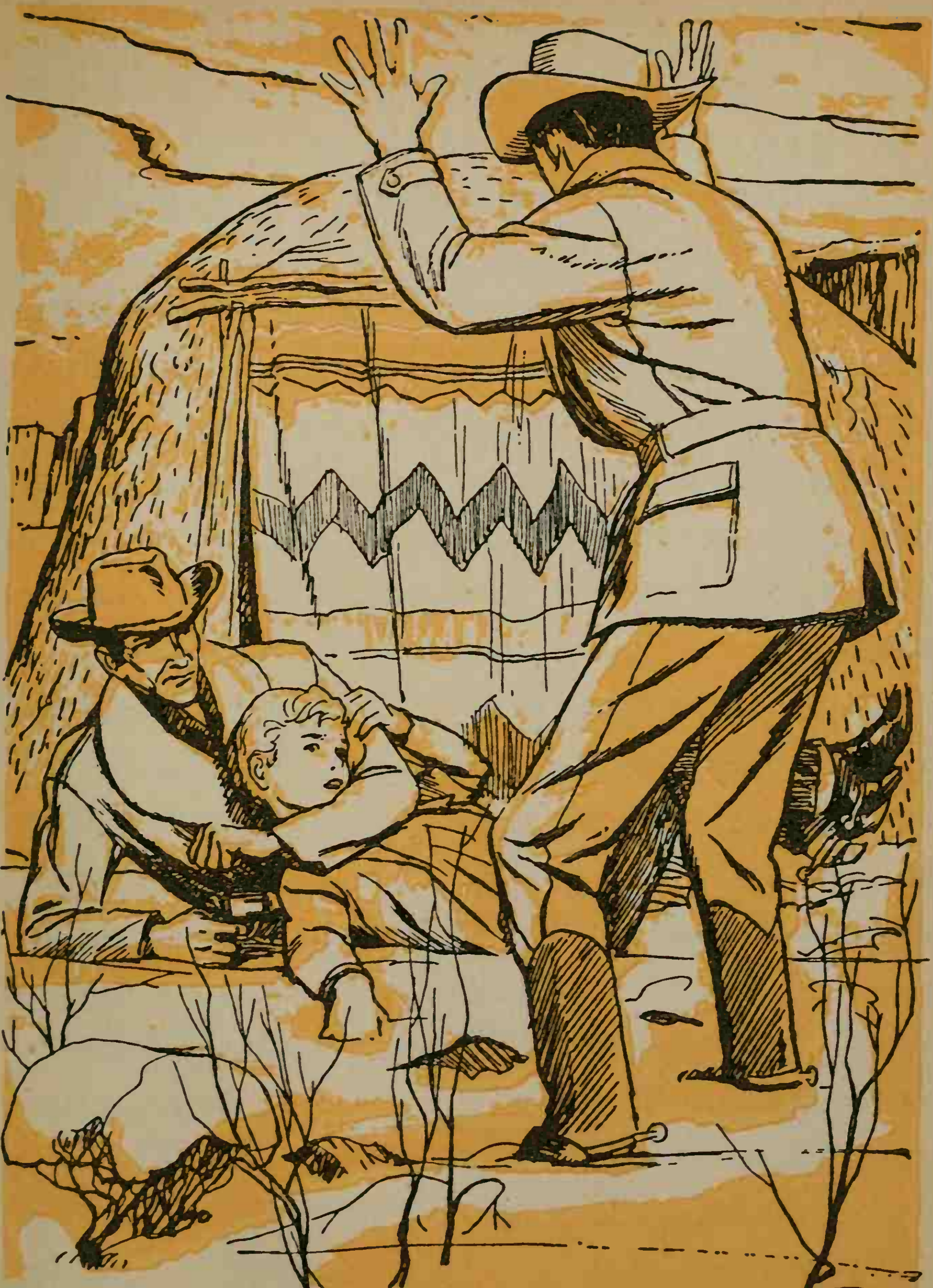
"I'm sorry, Roy." Pete got it out hoarsely. "I messed that up. I just couldn't get away from the ice."

"It's all right, Pete," Roy said. Roy was standing where he had been before. "It'll give him something to think about. Maybe we can worry him to death."

Burton got up carefully, pulling Pete along with him. When they stood, the killer's arm relaxed a bit. Burton looked at Bullet, still standing in the rocks, but silent now, waiting for a word from Roy.

"Get that mutt down here before I shoot him where he stands."

"Go ahead and try it," Roy said. "You can't hit him with



that gun at the distance and you know it."

"You ain't forgot the rifle, have you?" Burton gave his body a half turn so Roy could see the .30-.30 clamped against his ribs by his arm.

"You'll have a hard time keeping it on Pete and dropping Bullet, too," Roy said. "That's a hard choice."

Pete sensed indecision going through the killer's thoughts. He knew Roy had made a point worth thinking over. At the range, the revolver was a sure miss, and a lot could happen in the time that Burton would need to aim and fire the rifle.

"Maybe it is a hard choice," Burton said when he had made his mind up. "I can do it here, though. Call him down. I'm not going to have that beast running wild around me."

Roy folded his arms across his chest, and smiled, and Pete took heart from the look of it. It seemed like Roy was already moving out ahead. "I don't think I will," he said. "He's all right where he is."

"You seem to forget I've got the kid, here. How'll you have it, the kid or the dog?"

"Neither one," Roy said. The smile was still there, but he was going carefully, like he wanted to make sure Burton got the sense of it. "Listen." And when he said that he raised his heel and brought it down upon the icy ground and the sound was like a shot in the coldness of the canyon. Pete heard it echo all around them.

"So?" Burton said, but even Pete had got the significance of it.

"The cold'll make that gun of yours heard for ten miles today. For all you know, Pete's pa is within hearing distance now. You lost a night, remember, lying over here."

Burton laughed, but the laugh was rough, without humor. "I lost him. He doesn't worry me any more. The snow covered up my tracks. He's got to sleep, too."

"I wouldn't count on any of that," Roy said. "He can sleep in snatches, and he can piece your trail out, too. Every time you put your foot down in loose snow you leave an imprint on the ground beneath. The wind's been blowing hard up there. Some of those imprints are bound to be clear. It only takes a few every now and then to show a good tracker where you're going. And Pete's pa is the best tracker in this country."

This time Burton thought for a long while before he spoke again. It was something Pete would never have come across if he had figured all day long, but it seemed natural to Roy. He knew the killer was worried plenty now.

"Maybe you got a point, at that, Rogers," Burton said after a while, "but that won't keep me from shootin' if the need arises. Don't forget that." Burton paused and looked around; he took a long look at Bullet standing in the rocks, waiting still. "I'll let the mutt go for now. But you keep him under hand. I don't want him to leave your side."

"That's showing sense," Roy said. He called to Bullet, and Bullet started down. "I'll keep him close."

"Now, saddle up," Burton said, and this time Pete knew he heard an urgency in the killer's voice. He knew Burton was thinking of the long day to come, of the posse maybe on his trail, still, for all the wind and snow. "We've wasted half an hour getting started."

It occurred to Pete that Roy knew when he had made his point and was satisfied with it, because he didn't have any more to say just then. With Wind Singer pitching in, he pulled the rigging from beneath the tarp and got the horses ready. Every now and then he would drop a blanket, or get a headstall buckled loose, or tight, whichever suited him, as if he was killing time. He made a real big thing of getting the pack all tied down on Molly.

Pete knew it was getting into Burton that Roy should dawdle. Once it seemed as if he would put the gun on Roy, but then he changed his mind. Maybe he figured that more words now would only serve to drag things out still more. Likely, he figured to settle up with Roy some time later on.

"That's about it, I guess," Roy said when the animals were saddled up and set to go at last.

"And about time, too," Burton said. "Don't think I missed any of your little show."

"Show?" Roy said, and he looked surprised.

"Droppin' this and droppin' that—do you think I'm not on to you?"

"Why, man, it's cold," Roy said. "Try loading up your own self with your bare hands, if you don't believe me. Here, I'll hold the gun for you."

"Just forget it, Rogers," Burton said, sounding a little as though he regretted having mentioned the matter at all. "Just forget it. Mount up, now, let's go."

Burton took his arm from around Pete's neck, and stepped aside. "You lead out, Rogers. I want that Indian behind you; he can lead these other horses. The kid will ride ahead of me." The killer paused to put the pistol in his pocket, and get the .30-.30 in his hands. "I'll ride with the rifle," he added.

Roy swung up without saying anything, and then spoke to Wind Singer, who looked bewildered when he understood, but then he slowly nodded and climbed upon the burro. Roy gave him the hackamores holding Molly and the colt, and when everything was set he moved ahead. Pete waited until Burton nodded before he climbed on Buck, and it wasn't until they were all lined up facing toward the passage that the killer got himself mounted up on Alex.

"Let's go, Rogers," Burton said then. It was the first anyone had spoken for a full minute.

"All right," Roy said. "Ready, Pete?"

"Any time," Pete said. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Roy spoke to Trigger, and the gold horse moved. Pete had his eyes hitched around on Burton, and he saw something move through the killer's face as he watched the palomino walk away. Was it greed? Pete wondered. Then they were going forward, through the passage and into the canyon spreading out. Roy led them to the branch he had traveled through alone.

"Could be out of here by early afternoon," Roy said. "Maybe sooner. Depends on how we go."

"You mean to the Verde?" Burton asked in surprise.

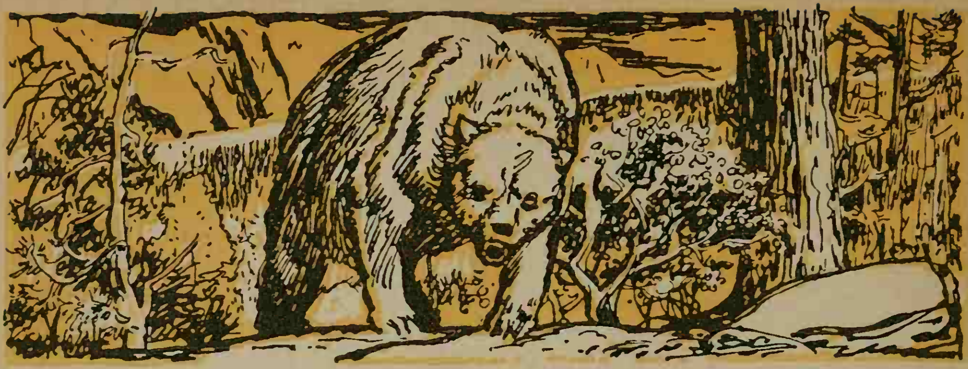
"No. This particular canyon, is all."

"What then?" Burton said.

"Oh, a lot of country," Roy said. Roy turned around and grinned at the killer bringing up the rear. "If I told you, the trip'd get monotonous."

"Pretty smart, aren't you? Don't try anything foolish."

"I won't," Roy said, and there was a space of time before he finished it. "I think you'll be doing that yourself."



CHAPTER 14 • The Big Break!

Pete kept watching the clouds of steam rising from the horses' nostrils, and listening to the sharp, metallic ring of the shoes striking on the ice, the frozen ground, and the stony trail. He thought again that it was really a good deal colder than it seemed. The sun coming directly into the canyon was deceptive in its warmth; it would warm a foot, say, if the foot was being shone upon, but the other, maybe shadowed by the horse, would sting with cold. His face was like that, too, the one side feeling comfortable, as it always did, but the other feeling stiff and frosty.

They figured to reach the basin along about noon, and it was getting on toward mid-morning now. They weren't going fast, because of the uncertain footing underneath, but they were going steadily, and they were getting there. A pace like this would get them into Ben Tate's by night if they kept it up. Would this help or not?

Pete wondered if he had told the killer about there being anyone like Ben up ahead of them. It wouldn't surprise him any if he had, he had been so all-fired mouthy. But Ben had become such a queer sort, he likely wouldn't try to help them, anyway.

"How you doing, Pete?" It was Roy calling back across his shoulder. The sounds carried so well in the cold he hardly had to raise his voice.

"Pretty good," Pete said. "I'm coming along, just like everybody else." Pete watched Roy's broad shoulders moving with the rhythm of the horse's gait. The sunbeams shattered on the silver mountings of his saddle, and splashed off every which way.

When Roy spoke again he talked in Navajo, and this time Burton interrupted. "None of that, Rogers. I don't savvy Indian talk. Keep it English or not at all."

"Why, golly, I was only asking how he was," Roy said. "An old feller like Wind Singer isn't used to any such treatment, and he's got to be checked on now and then. He isn't used to any such trek as this."

"It's a long way down from the reservation, isn't it?" Burton said. "He made that one, all right."

"But it likely took a month," Roy said right back at him. "This is different."

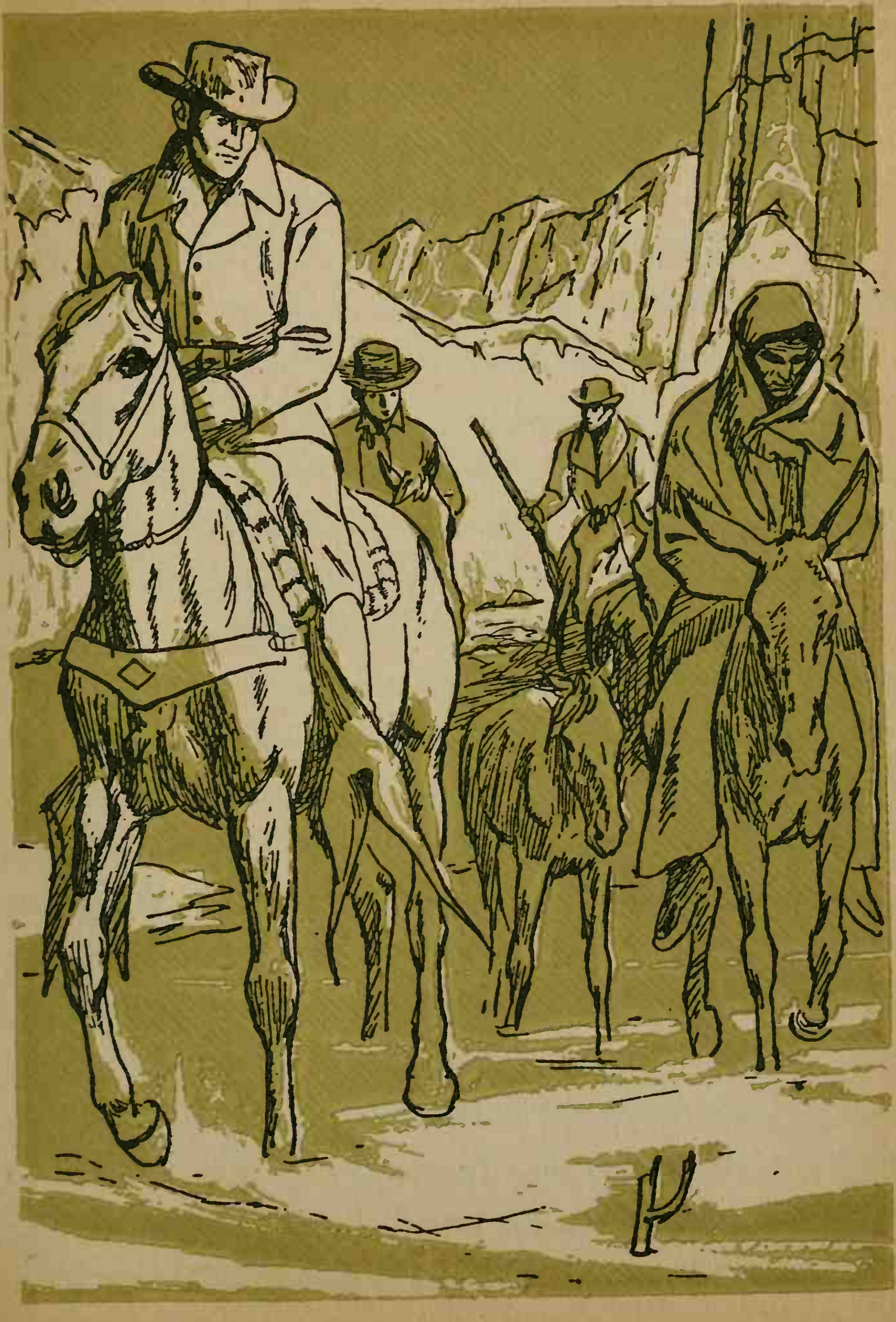
"I don't care if it took a year; keep it English, anyway. Be all right with me if he drops dead right now."

Nobody said anything for a while after that. There wasn't much point in talking, anyway, now that everything seemed settled. There had been a point in it before when they had been sparring with the killer, maybe seeking an early end to his control of things, but there didn't seem to be a chance of that now, that Pete could see.

Could be night would bring a change, when they camped, if they didn't go straight on out, riding all the while. But Roy had already taken one chance with Burton's gun jabbing into Pete's back, and Pete knew he wouldn't likely take another.

Maybe Roy was only talking the way he had to cheer them up. Maybe he was trying to keep them from thinking of the possibilities too much. It came over Pete that the way of things might not look good to Roy, and he was trying to divert their thoughts from it.

It occurred to him that there was a good chance they all might die. The notion brought a sudden, sharp chill up his back, and it wasn't helped any by the creaking of



Burton's saddle in back of him, or the horse's hoofs going up and down. In his mind's eye he could see the rifle pointed at his back.

As sure as if he had been told of it, he knew that death was close, and likely getting closer.

The sounds of the killer's nearness sharpened the reality of it for him. This riding through the cold hours with his thoughts was the first chance he had had to work it all out and arrive at some conclusion.

It was a hard thing to stand off, looking at it all, and think about them being shot. Because the idea didn't surprise him now, he wondered if it hadn't come upon him a while before, and had simply lain inside his mind, waiting for a chance to come out and get attention.

It might be that a person's thoughts sometimes kept unpleasant notions buried deep, not admitting them until there wasn't any way to keep them hidden any more. Likely, the idea had first crept into some secret pocket of his head when Burton had told them of his plans for getting out, perhaps when the killer had bragged how easily he would evade pursuit once he reached the Verde.

Would he tell them all those things if he planned to let them live? Especially since he knew for sure that Tom

Roberts's wounds had killed him? What was to prevent them chasing him themselves, once he had let them go and they could get some armament? If they were free, a posse could get organized again, and chase be given.

Burton was going to kill them, Pete was sure of it. In time, once Burton was sure of the way to freedom, that .30-.30 would start to hammer at their backs.

All at once there was a strange sound, and when he had placed it, Pete knew that old Wind Singer had had his premonition, too. The medicine man was keening out his death chant. The weird crying seemed like nothing natural or human sounding in the clear cold air, echoing upon the red cliffs streaked with dazzling snow.

"What's that?" The sound had startled Burton. Pete half turned around and watched the killer swing the rifle, as though the cliffs contained the source of it.

"The old man is giving us a song," Roy said from up ahead, and Pete knew from the way he said it that Roy knew what it was, although he wasn't letting on yet. "Likely wants to pass the time of day."

"Well, tell him to cut it out," Burton said. "What makes him think that's singing?"

"I guess one of his spirits said it was," Roy said. "Navajos set a heap of store by what their spirits say."

"I don't care who told him," Burton said. "I don't like it. Shut him up."

"Won't do any good to talk to him," Roy said. "He seems to have the smell of something."

"This rifle can give an argument," Burton said. "I don't mind using it."

"That won't make any difference. He's ready for it any time you are. That's a death chant he's singing."

"Death chant?" For a moment Burton seemed to be taken aback, some, and then he chuckled as though he saw a note of grisly humor in it. "Well, what d'you know about that!"

Once he knew what Wind Singer was wailing over, Burton didn't try to make him stop. Pete wondered if it didn't appeal to something unnatural in his makeup to listen to the old man sing about his end. The killer certainly seemed to take an enjoyment in it. There must be something warped and twisted in his heart. A man who enjoyed himself in gloating over another's death wasn't a natural kind of man at all. He was sinister and evil, not a part of humankind.

It must have given Burton quite a laugh to see Tom

Roberts buckle over when the fat slugs came ripping into him.

Pete held onto the reins and looked around. It didn't do any good to brood about it. There would be a piece of time, yet, before Burton started anything. He would have to know for sure he was on the way to freedom. Once the canyon was gone behind, and then the basin, the moment would start getting closer. Sooner or later, Burton would have it figured out that the main canyon showed the way. If he had any sense at all he would know the creek flowed to the Verde.

And the moment he had that worked out would be the time of danger. For all his chatter, Pete had not revealed the nature of the route that one must follow to get out of here. And Roy hadn't done it either. That much they had to their advantage, if they could use it.

On the other hand, the killer might recognize the canyon for what it was right off. If he decided it would lead him to the Verde, the hour might be closer than Pete thought.

The way wound through the branch canyon and Wind Singer's death wail came forlorn and eerie in the sunlight streaming down; it was a little bit like the crying chant of a Navaho *yei-bei-chai* team Pete one time heard near

Chinle on the reservation. Pete saw the old man hunched on his burro underneath his blanket, the iron-gray hair knotted in its turn of cord, looking cold like the day.

What kind of thoughts, he wondered, went through the old man's mind as the chant keened out of him? Would it make a difference now if he had killed the bear? Maybe the grizzly would have made big medicine for him, big enough to make the necessity of a death chant a laughing matter.

Wind Singer's song was 'way, far away, from this place now. It was as though his spirit had already left, and it was only his body hunching on the droop-eared burro. Maybe Wind Singer's spirit was with the *yeis* already, in the far-off Lukachukai Mountains.

Pete made his mind go away from the *yeis,* from the Navajo gods, and from the chant. He watched Molly going along behind the burro on the hackamore, and Rusty trailing her. Anyway, they had saved them from the bear, whatever happened next.

Would the killer let them live, or would he shoot them, too?

He shook himself, and said inside his head he shouldn't think that way. Even though he couldn't think how they might get out of this, he knew that life meant hope, that time meant opportunity, perhaps—if they knew one when they saw one.

And now that he had come across that line of thought he was a little bit ashamed of having dwelled upon the black side as he had. How would his grandpa have made a go of it if he had done that? What if he had given up every time the Apaches came screaming down the canyon?

Noon came and the branch began to broaden out. Soon they came to the fork and Pete glanced into the other branch where he had gone alone, and thought how long ago that seemed. It must be events piling into one another that made time stretch out somehow.

Now the basin gleamed ahead, broad and shining with the fallen snow. Pete felt his eyelids closing automatically against the glare, and his eyes blurred and ached until he got accustomed to it. Even then, a squint was all he needed every now and then to see things.

Once in the broad bowl, Roy led the way along the edge, beneath the scarlet cliffs reaching up. Already, Pete could see the main canyon in a dark slash to the south. He looked around more, and saw the cattle, too, some of them scattered here and there. The snow lay deep and drifted beneath the clumps of trees, but every now and then the grass was swept and bare.

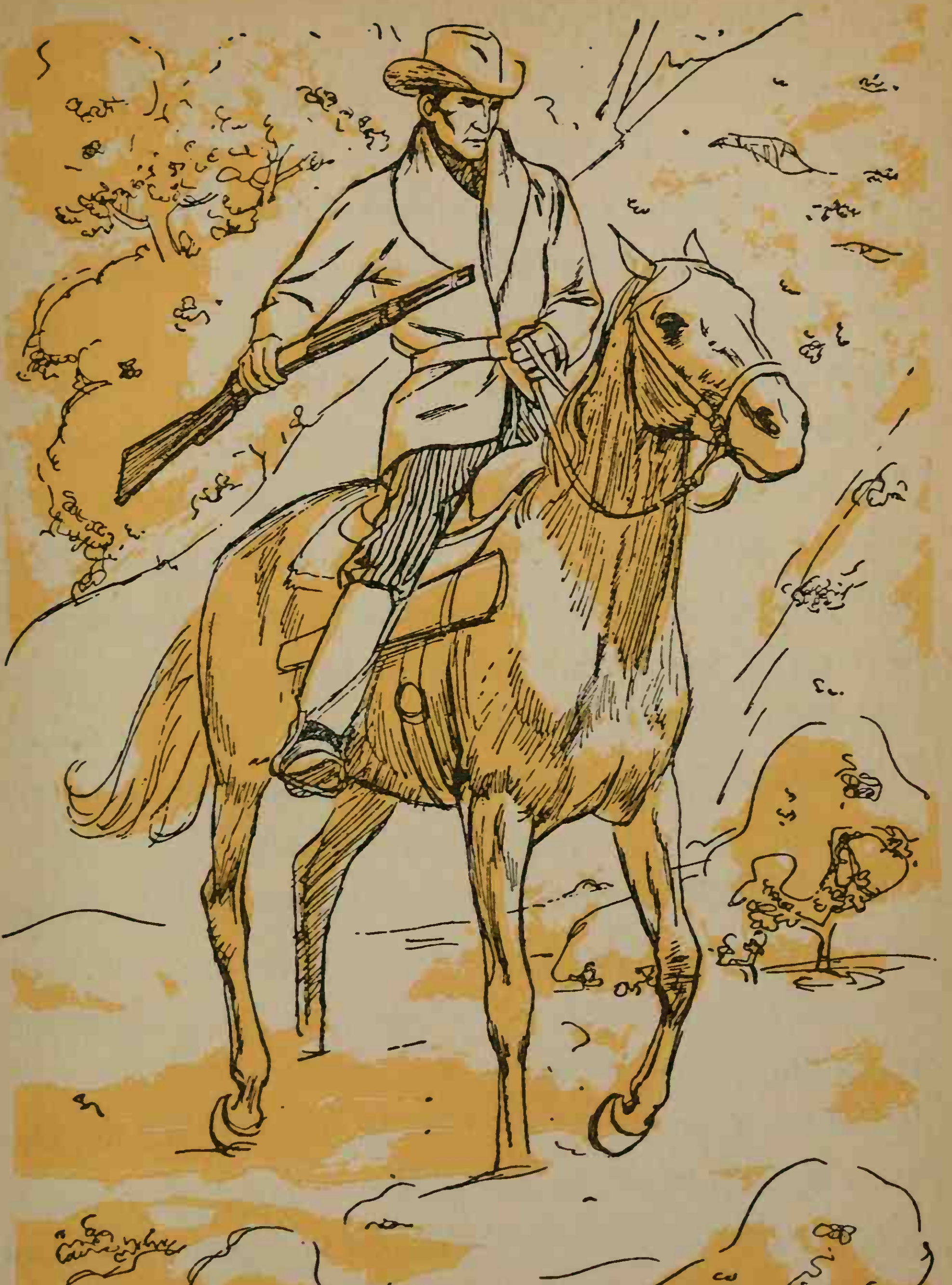
Pete wondered when someone would get to bring those cattle down. He wondered when his pa would get the bear. Despite his determination not to quit, not to give in, he thought about these things as if he had already been shot.

They gnawed jerky in the saddle, and continued south. The afternoon stretched itself across the sky; the land, and shadows rearranged themselves upon the rolling country as the light shifted with the hours. The sun was leaning far against the west when they left the basin and the canyon closed around them.

It mightn't be so long now, Pete thought. If they were going to get away, something had to happen.

Something did, after a while, but it wasn't what he might have asked for. Alex threw a shoe. Pete heard the clang against the rocks and when he looked around the one-time packhorse was already limping. Burton was scowling at its head as though he thought Alex had thrown the shoe on purpose.

"Must have got snow in between it and the hoof, and loosened it," Roy said. Roy stopped at the sound, and he hunched around in his saddle looking back.



"It likely formed ice," Pete said. "That'd swell enough to loosen it, and the wear'd pull it off."

Burton looked up sharply as the other two pulled to a halt and spoke. "Just take it easy, you two; me an' the horse can work this out alone. We don't need you crowding around. String out there again, both of you."

"Don't you want to bring that shoe along?" Roy said. "A fair chance we can fix it in camp tonight."

"Leave it," Burton said. "I don't want anybody off his horse. And I ain't gettin' down either. We'll just keep goin', now that we know what it is."

At Burton's order, they went on again. The sound of the shoeless hoof made a kind of muted, off-beat rhythm echoing against the cliff walls to the right twenty or thirty yards away. Pete found himself clucking to it, some, because it had the same beat of the Spanish songs that Juan would sing. Somehow, though, he didn't feel the mood of those songs.

Another quarter-mile went by and Pete heard a snort. He looked around to see the killer stopped again. Burton appeared annoyed that Alex's limp should jar him so. And it would get worse, too, if he kept on riding him.

"I think this crow-bait is going to lose a leg," the killer said. "And I'm not going to ride him while he does. I want another animal."

"You want to ride Molly now?" Pete said. Pete was thinking carefully. He wondered if a chance of some kind had shown itself.

"Maybe you forgot what you said about that horse," Burton said to him. "But I didn't. I think I'll have the one you're riding on. Come on get down. And you stay where you are," he said to Roy.

As the killer spoke to Roy, Pete saw his eyes move over Trigger once again, the way they had when they had all started out. As though aware of this, Roy's touch made Trigger lift his head up proudly, and shake his mane in a flurry of gold and silver.

It almost seemed as if Roy was teasing Burton.

Burton kept on looking as the gold horse showed his beauty. He seemed to have forgotten all about Buck for the moment. Pete knew he saw greed shaping up on the killer's face.

"Wait a minute," Burton said, his mind changed all of a sudden. "I think I'll ride that one. I think I'll ride your horse, Rogers."

Roy sat where he was and didn't move. "I don't know that I want you riding him," he said.

"And I don't know that I care what you want," the killer said. Burton brought the buttstock of Roy's .30-30 off his hip and leveled the barrel across his legs.

"You're making it kind of hard for me to argue," Roy said, and Pete wondered all at once if Roy was trying to egg Burton on a bit. He almost dared to hope some kind of scheme was slowly being unfolded.

"I don't plan to make an argument of it," Burton said. "I guess you can understand an order." The muzzle of the rifle was pointing straight at Roy now.

Roy shrugged, as if there wasn't anything to do but what the gunman said. The saddle creaked as he put his weight to the left in climbing down.

"Take it easy," Burton said. "Keep yourself in plain view. No tricks. Go slow." The gun swung around to Pete again, as a warning.

Pete felt Buck wiggle underneath him and prance a little with his forefeet. Alex hitched his rump around, and stamped, and tossed his head a time or two; the burro levered his ears, and breathed in deep gusts. It was as if there was a nervous, skittish quality about this that they all could feel, or a current of air that carried mysterious, unsettling news upon it. Even Bullet had become excited; it didn't seem as if the simple changing of a horse could cause it all, but Pete couldn't think what else.

Roy was down, the reins in his hands, standing quietly, waiting for the other man. Burton took it slow, and the rifle stayed on Pete all the while.

"You can ride that Molly horse, or the peg-leg, here," Burton said to Roy. "Take your choice."

"Almost have to be Molly," Roy said. "Can't ride on a lame animal."

"Do you want Buck?" Pete said. "I don't mind going bareback. I've done it plenty."

"So've I," Roy said. "Thanks, but I'll take Molly, Pete."

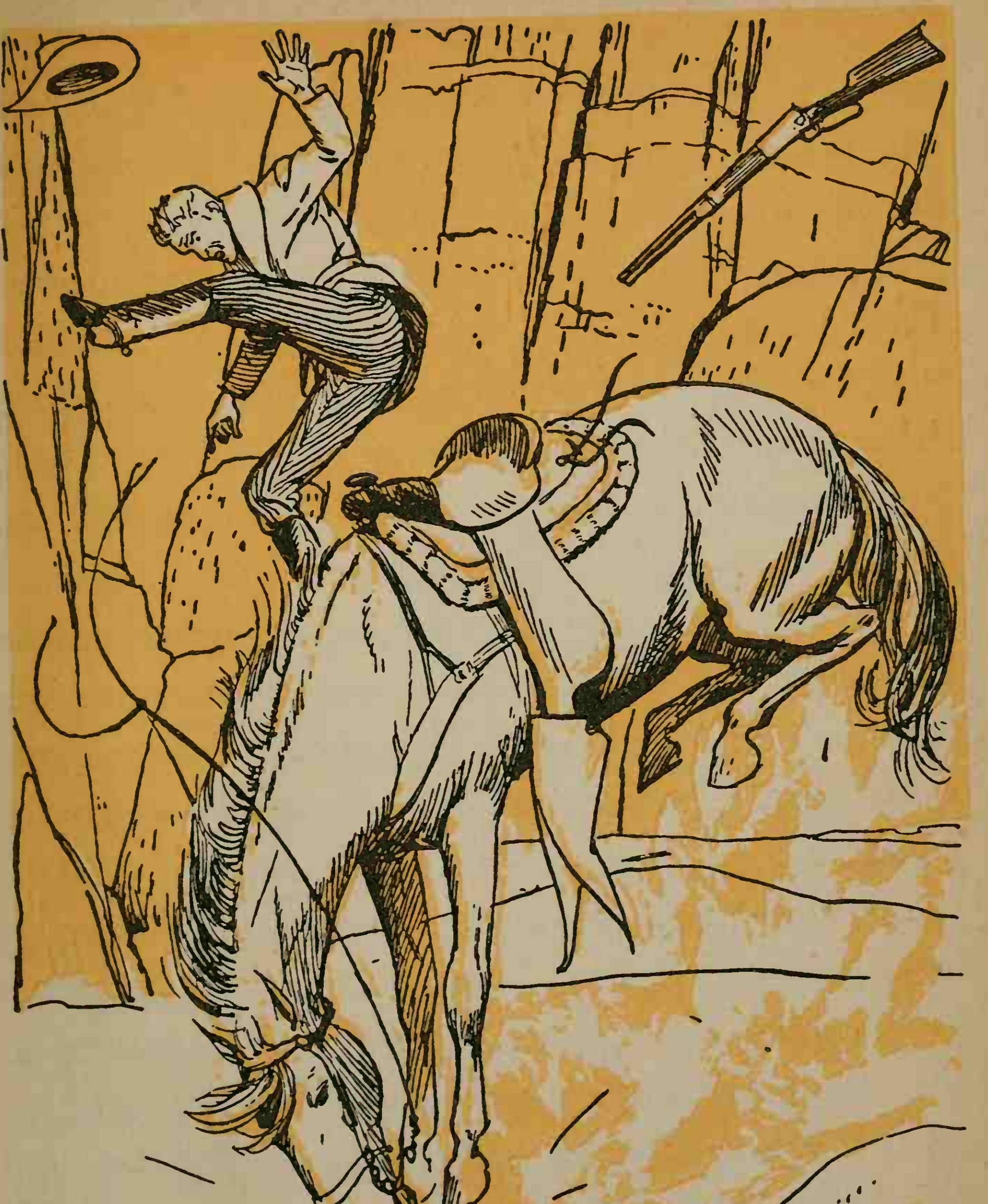
They were watching Burton, and Burton must have felt it because he kept the rifle moving back and forth between them once he hit the ground. Pete wondered if he shouldn't take a chance and run him down with Buck, but the same thing must have come to Burton because the gun came around again, and he veered around him in a semicircle, making for the other horse. There was a stretch of several yards, and Pete knew he wouldn't make it before the gun went off.

By this time Roy had got around to Molly and was beginning to remove the pack. But Pete saw that his head was turned in such a way that he could keep an eye on Burton.

Burton took another look at them before he mounted up. There was a second when both his hands were occupied, but the time was not enough for either Roy or Pete to move. From where Pete sat, Roy was closer, but Roy didn't seem to have a thought about a break. His waiting, watching stance was a curious kind of thing to see.

Burton was practically settled in the saddle when the gold horse moved. It wasn't a part of this snorty, stamping feeling which the others had, but something special and convulsive. Pete had an impression of the gunman's right leg going across the cantle, and of the rifle barrel shining in the sun. Burton's hands were locked around the pommel to brace himself.

There wasn't any signal given for the whole thing to come apart. It was as if Trigger had it all worked out himself and Roy didn't have to do a thing about it. Trigger's legs bunched up before the man upon his back was squared away, and the saddle exploded against his seat as he lowered into it. Pete heard the impact like a single gunshot in the frosty air.



Everything went fast and sudden after that. A million things happened all at once and Pete hadn't mind enough to keep them straight. At the same time as the saddle-smack, a yell came out of the killer, and the rifle leaped from his hands and arced away.

Pete saw the shining of it against the sky, and against the rocks as it fell again.

The ground was shaking as the gold horse rose and plunged. Burton looked like a sack of grain swaying every which way. Squealing filled the air, and Bullet barked ferociously. Pete felt Buck dance again beneath him, but with vigor now. Pete's mind registered all these things as being separate, but they happened in a split second, all at once.

The second time Trigger's forefeet clubbed the air the killer began to fall. Pete saw his left foot leave the stirrup as he lost his balance. His hat sailed away like a scared bird and his hair popped up and flowered out like Trigger's mane and tail. When he spilled over, Pete saw his hand clawing for the pistol in his pocket.

Burton was falling on the far side, and Roy began to move. He ran in a low crouch toward the gold horse, going fast. As he tried to brake himself he slipped on the icy ground and fell, hitting the hard earth at the same time Burton's pistol roared. Pete saw snow and ice spray a yard from Roy's head when the bullet struck.

All at once Pete felt himself kicking Buck along the flanks. Buck lunged in front of Roy, and Pete saw the killer all of a sudden, and he knew what Tom Roberts had looked at when death came calling on him. He saw the white face, thin and vicious, and the bared teeth in the rip of mouth. For a second Burton was obscured as Buck swung his head around and Pete kicked him straight ahead.

Somewhere underneath and still ahead the gun roared again and Pete felt a hot wind go past, and when he got another look, Burton had rolled from under and commenced to run. Bullet had come from nowhere like a hungry wolf and was trying to pull him down. The killer tripped and fell and slashed at Bullet with the gun as he rolled and came to his knees and to his feet again. In his sudden panic, he kept running toward the shelter of the rocks and brush at the bottom of the cliffs.

Pete spurred Buck again, then reined him up when he thought of the rifle lying somewhere; but when he looked he saw Roy already going for it. When he turned around again Burton was nearer the rocks, and shelter, but everything had changed.

Pete saw the vast movement directly in front of Burton lifting from the obscurity of the brush and tumbled stone. He sat transfixed as he saw the towering shape continue rising against the scarlet cliff, the tearing claws in the heavy arms, and the flat and menacing head upon the thick neck. He was stunned at the sight of the lips curled back upon the dazzling fangs, and the mad, small eyes, red with murder.

Burton stopped and screamed, and Pete heard the pistol fire. Burton screamed again, and the pistol roared, and the bear's arm moved. Pete saw something like a big red rose flowering on Burton's head and shoulder as the clawed arm struck and lifted him and flung him, and then he saw the dark shape of Bullet swerve to strike, but overshoot because the change of pace was too swift for the speed that he attacked with. Bullet's jaws snapped together on empty air as his momentum swung him past and he rolled and tumbled in the brush.

But the bear wasn't paying any heed to Bullet now. The bear had dropped to all fours, and was lunging forward. The horses were wildly jumping as they caught full sight of it and saw it coming for them.

Buck was plunging and Pete was trying to get a grip on Trigger's reins and quiet his own horse all at once. He missed the first time and nearly fell with the long reach, and when he grabbed again he heard the rifle fire. He tried to look but he had too much to do, with the horses squalling and milling about.

Then he looked and got a glimpse of Roy standing out in front of him. Roy had the rifle to his shoulder and the bear seemed right on top of him. It was maybe ten yards off and rising to its hind feet as it neared its striking range. Pete saw the bright blood on its chest from the wounds of Burton's pistol, and then the new flow as the rifle slammed a string of shots out.

The bear didn't waver beneath the impact, but kept on coming. It seemed to double over some, but still it came. Pete saw the flying brass sparkle in the sunlight as Roy levered the empty cases from the chamber, and he saw the red mass swell and spread across the bear's chest.

When the pause in the firing came, Pete had the wild thought that the magazine was empty, but then he knew it wasn't because Roy still held the rifle to his shoulder. There was one more shot, and the sound of it was like the last and biggest sound on earth. Pete saw the bear's head jerk to the side, and then the huge shape loosened up and commenced to fall.

But its weight still gave it force, and Roy had to step aside so it didn't take him down.

CHAPTER 15 • A Regular Ramrod!

The horses had stopped stampeding, but they were shaking, still, and Molly had booted the pack all over the canyon. Pete discovered he was shaking some, himself, when he dismounted, and Roy crooked the rifle in his arm and took his hat off to wipe his forehead with his sleeve. It was quite a queer thing to see Roy perspire on such a cold day.

"I guess we found the bear, all right," Roy said. "Pretty near right in our laps."

"Holy smokes," Pete said. "I'll say we did." Pete stared at the great mass of fur and bulk, at the curving vicious claws and the blood running crimson on the snow. "I thought he'd never stop."

"I was beginning to wonder if he would, myself," Roy said. "I was getting a little nervous."

"I guess it would take a cannon to bring it down with one shot," Pete said.

"Could have used one, all right," Roy said. "This old thirty-thirty isn't quite the medicine."

"He's been hit before, too," Pete said as he remembered Burton shooting, and the firing in the night when the bear had come.

"It takes a lot of lead in the right places to do it proper. But we finally did it."

Wind Singer shuffled over in his blanket and stared impassively at the animal. Then a smile began to move across his seamed face and he leaned over and touched the bear along the flank. When he parted the fur, the broken arrow shaft was visible.

"It looks like everyone but me had a hand in it," Pete said. He laughed as though to make a joke of it, but he didn't feel that way.

"You had a hand in it, Pete," Roy said, as if he sensed the lack that Pete was feeling. "If you hadn't run Burton down with Buck, he'd have nailed me sure. You played your hand at just the right time. It was a dangerous thing to do, and I surely thank you."

"Why, I didn't even think of it," Pete said, and now he felt the warmth and color flooding through his face. He remembered Burton shooting, and the hot wind going past. "Buck seemed to want to go, and I just went along."

"I guess I ought to thank Buck, then," Roy said, and a teasing smile made its mark in the corner of his mouth.

The talk of Burton made them look toward the rock and brush, and they began to walk toward the battered figure in the snow. Pete knew before they got there that there wasn't a chance he would be alive. No man could live through the kind of clubbing the bear had given him. That one swipe had been enough to even up the score on the killer of Tom Roberts.

Pete wondered if he wasn't feeling sick, and he looked away. Roy took hold of his arm as they headed back.

"Doesn't need anything but a tarp around him now," Roy said. "We'll have to pack him out."

"That's right," Pete said. "I guess we will." In his mind he saw the grizzly rising from the rocks. He saw the sweeping forearm and the red rose suddenly flowering.

Wind Singer was on his knees by the bear, working with a knife from the tow sack. The old man looked up and grinned at them as they returned. Pete stood for a minute watching him while Roy took a tarp from the pack Molly had kicked around and went to Burton with it. If the hardiness of the bear was any indication, Wind Singer's medicine should be irresistible.

When Roy had rolled Burton in the tarp he came to Pete again, and they both looked up the canyon, north. In Pete's mind's eye the rolling basin glinted in the sun beyond the canyon mouth. As though they were really near at hand, he could see the small specks, which would be cattle, scratching through the snow for grass.

All at once, something moved inside him, and he felt light and easy.

"Now there's just the roundup left," he said.

"That's right," Roy said. "Everything's finished up but that. I guess we can handle that, all right."

Bullet came over and sat down, as though he, too, was thinking of the cattle.

"After all this, it ought to be a cinch," Pete said. "Do you think we ought to work up that way and camp, so as to get an early start in the morning?"

Roy looked at the sky before he answered. "Might be best to go down to Ben's place for the night. We'll have to get Burton down there, anyway."

"That's right," Pete said. "I feel kind of tired anyhow.

Tomorrow's soon enough. This clear spell should hold awhile."

They turned away, but something far up had caught Pete's eye and he stopped and looked again. He stared at the deep shadow near the cliff and saw the movement once again.

"A rider, Roy! Look!"

Roy looked where Pete was pointing, and nodded as he found it. "Well, sure enough, Pete. Coming fast now, too."

And it was so. As though he had seen them at the same time, the motion of the rider quickened. In a while the shadow fell away and he was cantering in the clear light. Pretty soon the hoofbeats of the cantering horse came down the canyon, and in another moment the nearness gave them detail.

"It's Pa!" Pete said. "I'd know Hurricane's gait anywhere! It's Pa, Roy; he's following our trail!"

"By golly, he's a kind of human bloodhound all by himself," Roy said, and let a laugh come out of him. "I hope he isn't sore we got his man."

Now the hoofbeats sounded near and hard, and in another minute Bruce was plain to see and waving at them. It struck Pete that Bruce should look surprised, until he remembered that his pa would surely recognize the hoofprints he was trailing—some of them, at least.

Bruce reined up in a flurry of loose snow and swung down from Hurricane almost before the horse had settled to a halt. He looked worried and glad and relieved to see them, all at once. Pete wondered if he didn't look a little angry, too.

"Are you all right?" It was the first thing anybody said, and Bruce got it out in a rush.

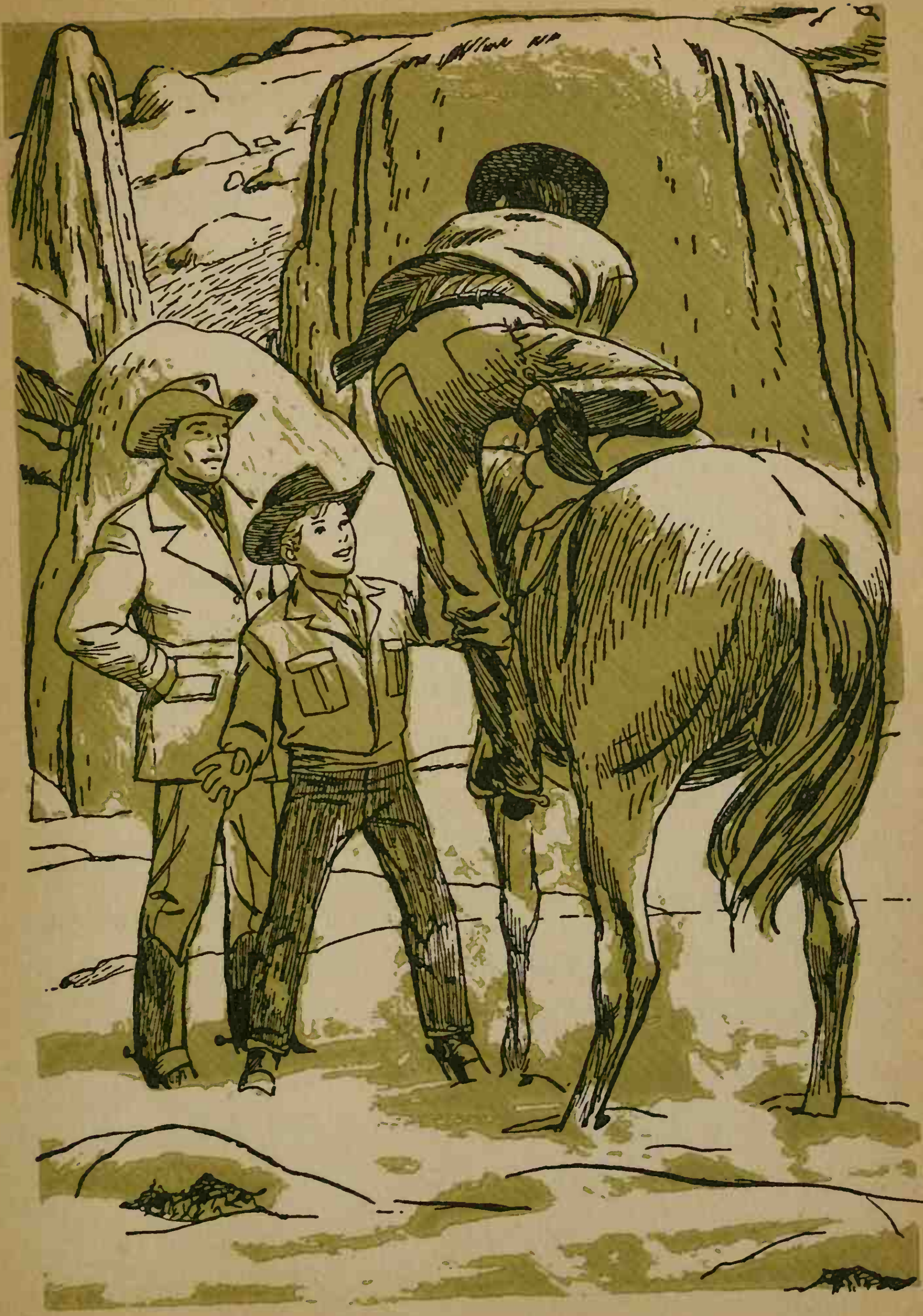
"We sure are, Pa," Pete said. "Look us over."

"I can't think why you might suspect we wouldn't be," Roy said. Roy was blowing on his fingernails and polishing them on his Levi jacket in a slightly grand manner. He was smiling in a sly way, too.

Pete's pa put his hands on his hips and gave Roy a good looking over. "All right, what is it? You've been in dangerous company, if you haven't guessed by now."

"Oh, that," Roy said, and his way with it implied it was a small matter, everything considered. Pete knew Roy was giving his pa a ribbing and he felt a smile working at his mouth. "We took care of that," Roy said, and he motioned toward the bear and the killer rolled in the tarp.

Bruce took his hands off his hips and looked around. It



was the first time he had taken note of what had happened. As he took it all in, astonishment, and then partial understanding, moved across his face. Pete chose his words carefully and told him how the thing had gone.

"Well, I'll be dogged," Bruce said at the end of it. "So that's what you've been up to. I got a little worried when I trailed him to the branch canyon and found the horse tracks. I couldn't figure out what you were doing there; I only hoped I'd catch up with you in time to head off trouble."

"We had trouble enough," Roy said, "but we got out of it. Pete, here, had quite a hand in the way things turned out."

Pete's boot was digging in the thin snow, and he felt warm again. His ears burned as Roy explained the climax of the thing in greater detail. When he glanced at Bruce, he saw his pa looking at him quizzically.

"You did that, Pete?" his pa said to him.

"It wasn't anything." And it wasn't, that he could think of. He hadn't thought he was being brave or big or anything like that.

"Looks to me like you really earned your chuck, son." Bruce tipped his hat back with one hand, then set it straight again. "By golly, you're growing up. Wait till your ma hears this."

"Of course," Roy said, and Pete heard the humor in his tone, "his way of getting us involved in this could likely stand some criticism."

Pete looked at Roy and knew he had to tell about his letting Rusty and the mare through the gate. He owed that much to Roy, and to his pa, as well. He gave it straight, and hoped he didn't sound deceptive or dishonest.

This time his pa looked up at the cliffs as though there was something up there that had caught his eye. His expression seemed to say he would like to hide Pete good, and that he would except for the surge of pride he felt. It was funny, Pete began to think, how a feller could do wrong when his intentions were good and true.

"Well, Pete, I guess you did save some calves. You sure enough put an end to what was getting at them."

"I don't guess I'd have done it that way if I'd known there was a grizzly in the picture."

"No, I don't suppose you would. I guess I ought to be plenty sore about this, but I can't seem to work any anger up."

"I already dressed him down," Roy said to Bruce. "I dressed him down for both of us."

"Well, that makes me feel a whole lot better," Bruce said. "Account of I don't have the heart to do it."

They went over and looked at the bear. Wind Singer had it skinned out now, and was starting on his other cuts. Roy told more about the old medicine man as they watched him, and after Bruce had got the straight of it he walked alone to the rolled tarp and undid a part of it to look inside.

"I put the bank notes in the tow sack," Roy said after Bruce came back. "I didn't bother to count them; didn't know how much there was supposed to be."

"The bank can worry about that," Bruce said. "I'm through with him now. And after that chase I'm plenty glad to be, too."

"I figured you'd be home long ago," Pete said. "I sure didn't expect to see you way up here."

"I didn't expect to be way up here. But he slipped off the mountain and headed north along the Rim. When the snow came, I had a time keeping to the trail until the wind blew some of it off and I could locate an imprint now and then."

"Roy figured you could trail him that way," Pete said. "I think he gave the killer a scare with that thought."

"I just wanted him to have something to think about," Roy said. "How about the dogs? And Sam?"

"They're going back along the Rim to block the Verde. Likely, they'll be at the ranch when we get there. As soon as I worked out he was entering the basin country, I knew I'd catch up with him. I found this game trail he'd taken into the branch canyon, and followed him. It was time, then, that was all. We'd catch him one way or the other."

"He said he nailed a couple of the dogs," Pete said. "Is that so?"

"He grazed one, is all," Bruce said.

"I'm glad it wasn't what he said," Pete said. "He had me scared for the dogs and you, too."

There was a quiet after that, and then a dog howled far away, and then closer, and soon after that Ben Tate came around the far bend from the south, riding on his burro. His old Bluetick was ranging out in front, and when he smelled the bear he made a great howl and came a-running for it. The sight of Bullet calmed him some, but he still came on.

In a minute Ben rode up with his beard waving and his rifle in his arms.

"I heard the shootin' up this way, an' I figured you'd met up with the bear. I see you did."

"We sure did," Roy said. "How come you know about this bear? You didn't know anything the other night."

"Oh, I'm just a lyin' son, that's all." Ben sloped off the burro and stood in his old shoes, staring at the bear. "My soul's been a-burning for not speaking out about it. I knew about it all the time."

"We gradually worked that out," Roy said. "We figured you knew about the horses, too, and maybe even Juan."

"I can't own up to Juan," Ben said. "I must have sure enough been in my diggings, then. But I admit of knowing of the horses going by, and the bear being in the country."

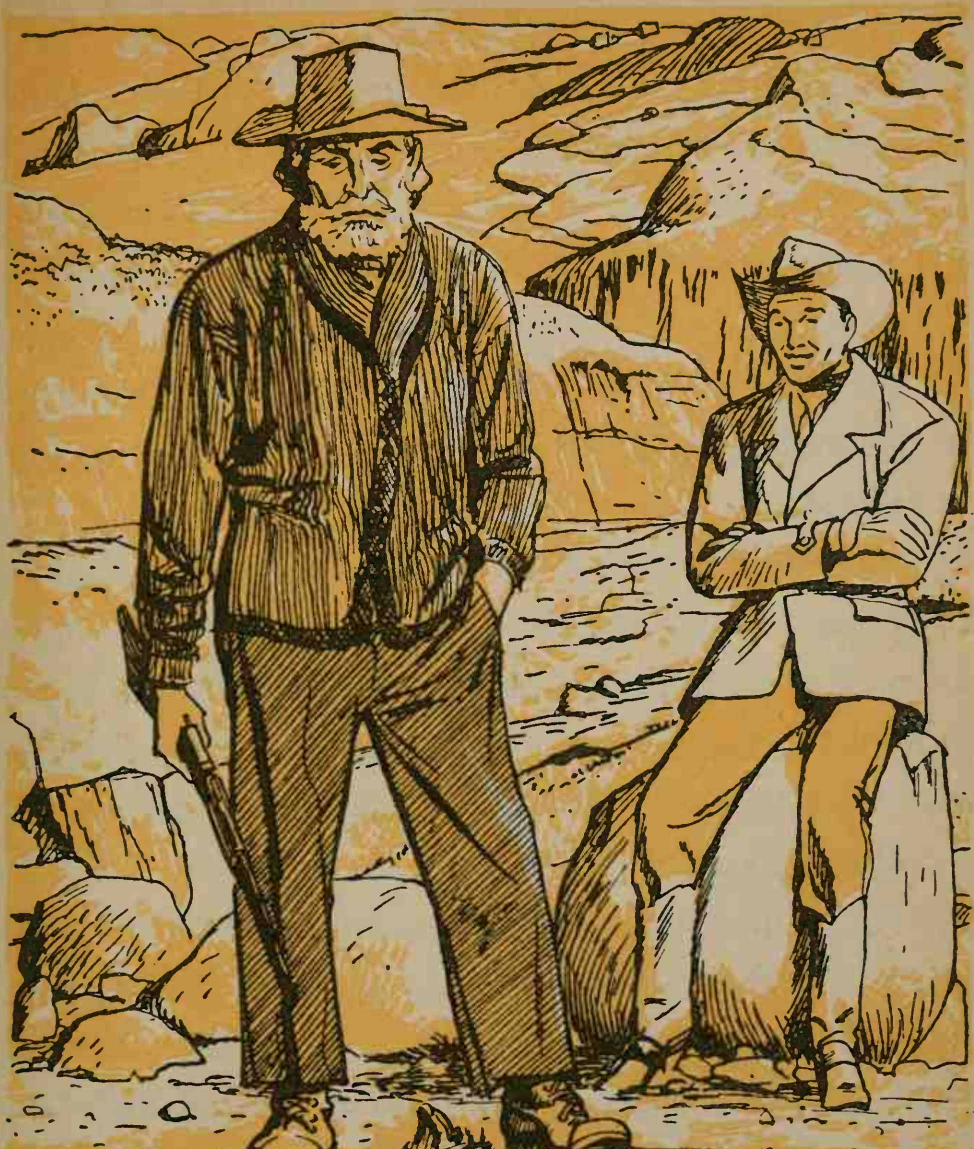
"Maybe you ought to say a word about it, Ben," Bruce said. "I don't suppose you owe an explanation, but it would be nice to have one."

"I just didn't want anyone messing around my place," Ben said. "I'd got pretty close to something mighty big and I wasn't going to have any interference."

"None of us would bother you any, Ben," Pete said.

"Your grandpap did, sure enough," Ben said, and his old eyes blazed with a young fire. "I wasn't going to invite history to repeat itself."

"That was different," Bruce said. "We don't care about your diggings. If you made a good strike, I'd say more



power to you, and it's high time you did."

Ben ground the buttstock of the ancient Henry rifle in the snow. "I was afraid you'd say something like that. Now you make me feel bad. You make me feel like a mean old polecat."

"Well, I sure didn't mean to do that," Bruce said, and he was smiling at the old man.

"Fact is, I got to feeling kind of poorly about the thing the other day, after Roy, here, and the boy had gone. I knew I'd done a wrong."

Ben stopped suddenly, plunged his hand into a pocket in his coat, and pulled it out again. When he opened it, Pete saw rose quartz with golden wires running through it. "There," he said to Bruce, "them nuggets're for you; and there's more where they come from."

"Holy smokes!" Bruce took the rose quartz nuggets in his hand and rolled them back and forth. Then he held them out to Ben again. "They're yours, Ben. It's your digging."

But Ben backed away, not accepting them. "Nope, you keep 'em; they'll help pay for the killed stock. For all the fifty years an' more I've been hunting them I been thinking of all the gay things I'd do when I struck it rich. An' now that I have, I don't want any of 'em. I guess the fun of it was in the digging, not the getting. I'm too far along to change my style of life."

Ben stopped again and cuffed at his beard with his gnarled fist, but no one said anything because they all knew he was going on.

"The other night I told your boy an' Roy about the fight with the boy's grandpap, an' maybe that set my mind to turning back, I don't know. We had our arguments an' scraps, but we had our fun, too. An' the queer thing about it—I dug them nuggets out of the very hole he had me cornered in."

"But those were pyrites," Pete said. "That's what you told us."

"They sure enough were," Ben said. "But only a couple weeks back I was digging in there again, an' this time I struck gold. It seemed to me it was a sign of some kind. I guess your grandpap dug that up as much as me. So a share of it belongs to you folks."

Bruce looked at the quartz again, and didn't speak for a time. "Ben, you're a generous man," he said at last. "I don't know that I should take this, though. How's it if we just take a few scraps?"

"That's all right by me," Ben said. "Providin' you'll allow me to dig up the biggest ones for you."

"Well, Ben, if it gives you pleasure, go ahead," Bruce said.

It was quiet, then, for a time, until Bruce looked around. "Getting on," he said. "We better load and ride. Can we lay over at your place tonight, Ben?"

"I'd be almighty insulted if you didn't," said the old man emphatically.

"Well, we sure do aim to please as best we can," Bruce said.

They got loaded up again, and set to move. The camping gear was kept on Molly, and the body of the killer was loaded onto Alex. It was just a short way down to Ben's, and the leg would hold that far. Wind Singer agreed to come along, and then start back toward his own country in the morning.

It was red and blue and beautiful as they started out in the falling dusk. Pete felt full of gladness and contentment as he watched the colors flow across the sky, making magic in the canyon. It was *embrujada,* or enchanted, both, whichever your mood or outlook.

There was just room enough for him to ride between his pa and Roy. Ben and old Wind Singer rode behind, and the two dogs rambled out in front, not arguing or being waspish any more, now that the bear was dead. The death of the bear seemed to have settled a lot of things.

"We figured we might start the stock down tomorrow, Pa," Pete said in a while.

"Did you, now?" Bruce said, looking at him sidewise. "Getting to be a regular ramrod for the outfit, aren't you?"

Pete thought he might be joking, but it made him feel good just the same. It seemed like he had grown a good deal in the past few days, and he would sure enough get to be a ramrod yet. Just having his pa take recognition of the possibility seemed to bring that moment closer.

He sat straight in the saddle with the reins held easily in his fingers, his free hand resting lightly on his hip.

To the rear, Ben's voice carried on the evening air. He was telling Wind Singer about the big gun battle more than fifty years ago.

"He's got himself a real audience now," Roy said. "He can spin that yarn a dozen times running and never wear it out. Wind Singer won't understand a word he says."

Pete was sleepy now, and he thought with longing of his bedroll and the long night coming on. He saw the colors wash away, and in a while the cold moon rose and shone upon the scarlet cliffs. Turning soft with the change, and glinting with the light, the snow looked like old Spanish plate, treasure of the wild, enchanted land.

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